

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト・黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

メグとゼロンIV

エアコ村連続殺人事件





ナタリア・スタインベック
(ナリー、またはナリータ)

三九〇年、
第六の月八日生まれ、十五歳、
上級学校三年生。
有名音楽家の街を持つ、
オーケストラ部所属で、
楽器演奏が得意。



ジェニー・ジョーンズ

三九〇年、第二の月十七日生まれ、十五歳、
上級学校三年生。ロウレンと二を争う大富豪の
家の生まれ、新聞部の部長。



新しい友達。

シュトラウスギー・メグミカ(メグ)

三九〇年、第二の月十四日生まれ、十六歳、上級学校三年生。
ベセルイルと王国連合スーペーイル出身でシュトラウスギーが名字。
ロウレンの引継ぎと転校で一年生遅れている。コラス部所属。



新しい友達。

片想いだが、何も言えず。
一緒にいるだけで嬉しい。

セロン・マクスウェル

三九〇年、第三の月三日生まれ、十五歳、上級学校三年生。
ロウレンと王国連合スーペーイルの首都特約地域にある第四上級学校生徒。
実業が通いのために暮住まい、部活は未所属。



頼りがいがある
“友達”として仲良し。

友達。
ニックの何かを知っている？

ニコラス・ブラウニング(ニック)

三九〇年、第四の月四日生まれ、十五歳、上級学校三年生。
中性的な容姿の持ち主、部活は未所属。
セロンとは顔見知り。



友達。

親友。
セロンの恋の
成就を
願っている。

ラリー・ヘップバーン

三九〇年、第五の月十二日生まれ、十五歳、上級学校三年生。
歴史ある軍人の家系に生まれ、自らも軍人を目指し訓練中。
セロンの大親友。



親友。恋愛の相談相手。
頼みにしている。

Seron Maxwell

Born on the 3rd day of the third month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. His hometown is far from school, so he lives in the dorms.

Strauski Megmica

Born on the 14th day of the second month of the year 3289. 16 years old. A third-year student. She is from the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. 'Strauski' is her family name. Because she started school a year after moving to Roxche, she is a year older than her classmates. Megmica is a member of the chorus club.

Larry Hepburn

Born on the 12th day of the fifth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He is from military family with a very long history, and trains daily to become a soldier himself. Larry is Seron's best friend.

Natalia Steinbeck

Born on the 8th day of the sixth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. Her parents are famous musicians. Natalia is part of the orchestra club, and is skilled with musical instruments.

Nicholas Browning

Born on the 4th day of the fourth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He has an androgynous appearance and is not part of any clubs. Nicholas and Seron are previously acquainted.

Jenny Jones

Born on the 17th day of the first month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. She is the daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche. Jenny is the president of the newspaper club.

Meg -> Natalia: A new friend.

Meg -> Jenny: A new friend.

Seron -> Meg: Has a crush on, but can't say anything. Is happy to just be around her.

Meg -> Seron: Thinks of as a dependable friend.

Seron -> Nick: Friends. Knows something about him?

Nick -> Seron: Friends.

Larry -> Seron: Friends. Is cheering on Seron's love.

Seron -> Larry: Friends. Asks him for love advice and finds him dependable.

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メグとセロン

エアコ村連続殺人事件

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Dearly beloved,
I will be by your side soon.
Let's meet again.

Prologue: The Conversations That Led up to That Day

<And that's how it is. Got everything down, Seron Maxwell?>

"Yeah. I think so."

<Oh? Then repeat all that and prove you remember.>

"I took notes, Jenny. We're holding the newspaper club's summer camp on the 1st day of the eighth month. Members must gather in front of the big clock at Capital West Station at 10 in the morning. The camp will take place at a villa owned by your relatives at Ercho Village in the Republic of Daurade to the north. The camp will last six days and five nights, with all living and food expenses covered. Members are free to wear what they please, but must bring their school gym uniforms. Good enough for you?"

<Yep.>

"Jenny, what's this camp all about? I've never heard of Ercho Village before. What kind of a place is it, and how do we get there? What will the villa be like? I need more information."

<You can see for yourself once you get there...but whatever. Ercho Village is the top local vacation spot for the upper classes. Which means you won't find it on any old travel magazine.>

"I see. What's the climate like?"

<About the same as the Capital District. There's no comfortable train service all the way there, so we have to move by car. It takes about five hours from the Capital District. I'll take care of the car and the driver. We'll have motion sickness medicine, just in case.>

"And your driver is a licensed bodyguard?"

<Of course. I'm also bringing along a female bodyguard. So no one needs to bring personal security detail. If you insist, I could find them someplace to stay in the area, but there's nothing but personal villas around so the accommodations won't be close.>

"Could you tell me about the accommodations?"

<A big villa my relatives own. I used to go a lot when I was little, but I haven't visited in about two years. The couple that manages the place is really nice. They're really good cooks, too. But make sure you tell me ahead of time if anyone's allergic to anything. Local specialties are meat and cheese. And FYI, the villa's not having any other guests while we're there. Every member gets their own room. And their number—it's area code 898, then 13xxxx.>

"'898-13xxxx'. Got it."

<Good. Anything else?>

"We have four whole days, excluding the first and last days. What in the world are we going to do?"

<First, I'm going to teach you to use a camera properly. Although now that I think about it, we don't have the facilities to develop and print them. I'll get one camera for each person. Then I'm going to teach you to use a typewriter. And also how to take notes and how to format a newspaper article. I want an issue of our paper on the campus walls the second the new term begins.>

"I see. Anything else?"

<...Hmm... That's about it. The rest of the trip you can think of as a fun vacation where we get to know one another. Just relax, I guess?>

“Got it.”

<You could try and sound a little more excited about it, Seron. This is a summer camp.>

“I *am* happy.”

<Have you ever heard of something called ‘emotions’?>

“I might have.”

<...I want you to contact the others and check with them to see if the schedule works. I can adjust the date by a couple days if I have to, so call me back with everyone’s answers. You still have all the contact information, right?>

“Yeah. But why are you making me contact them?”

<Club tradition says the treasurer’s in charge of making announcements, Seron.>

“Did you just make that up, Jenny?”

<Wow, are you psychic? Anyway, I’m counting on you. Use those psychic powers of yours if you want to save on the phone bill.>

* * *

“So you joined the newspaper club? I’m surprised. I thought the old one got shut down after the members left.”

“It is still up! That is why I, Strauski Megmica, am honorable to have two clubs attended at the same time! And I earned five Roxchean friends in one blink!”

“Nice! I’m so proud of you for getting out there and making more friends, Meg. This calls for a round of applause!”

“Thank you very much, Lillia. Your commending gives me confidence.”

“And it sounds like the other club members are all great people, too. I’m glad.”

“Let’s use Bezelese now, Lillia. Do you remember Seron Maxwell from art class last term? He’s really smart.”

“Mhm. I sort of remember his face. The black-haired pretty boy. His family runs the frozen food company, right? I’m surprised you’re talking to me about a boy, Meg. What’s next? Fish raining from the sky?”

“You think so? Anyway, there’s also Larry Hepburn and Nicholas Browning from our year, too. Larry is really strong and Nick’s a talented actor.”

“Oh. Just friends, huh.”

“Of course.”

“... ”

“What is it, Lillia?”

* * *

<Hey Seron. Just got back from the family vacation. How’re you doing? You called last night?>

“Larry...my friend Larry Hepburn...”

<What’s up, buddy? You don’t sound too good.>

“Please tell me...”

<T-tell you what?>

“Tell me how to call a girl’s house—Megmica’s house specifically... What do I do? Wouldn’t it be rude to call out of the blue? Would she get in trouble if a boy were to call her at home? What time would be the best, do you think? What if her parents pick up? How do I explain myself? What if they don’t approve of me? Should I first tell them that I’m calling strictly on newspaper club business? Or do I talk about the weather first? It’s summer, right? Not spring or winter? How do I start?”

<First, calm down.>

* * *

<So we’re having a summer camp. Can you make it, Lia?>

“Sure. Sounds interesting, and I’m pretty much free. Is there a piano in that villa, by any chance?”

<How am I supposed to know? You can carry your piano along on your back, just in case. Anyway, I need your help.>

“What now? It’s not like you to ever sound serious about anything, shortie.”

<I don’t care, Lia. Look. Have you ever called Megmica’s house before?>

“Two or three times, yeah. I was surprised how good her brothers are at Roxchean. Kids really learn quick.”

<Then pass along all this info about the practice camp to Megmica. Once she tells you if she can go or not, call me back.>

“I can do that. But—”

<And make Megmica promise not to tell Jenny that she heard about this from you.>

“Huh? ...Oh, I get it.”

<Get what?>

“Jenny went to Seron with this info, right? And she told him to contact the others. But Seron couldn’t bring himself to call Megmica’s house, so he went crying to you. I would call Megmica and pass on her answer to you, you’d pass it on to Seron, and he’d report to Jenny. And in exchange, you get to copy Seron’s homework over the summer camp. Am I right?”

<Lia...are you psychic or something? You can read my mind over the telephone?>

“Took you long enough.”

* * *

“Elsa, have you seen Nick anywhere?”

“Hm? Baby brother was in the garden earlier, swinging around that staff of his. It’s like he never gets tired of it. Why?”

“I forgot to tell him a call came in for him just earlier. I suppose it could wait. He’s not going to come back until he’s drenched in sweat.”

“Oh? Was it another girl?”

“Not this time, Elsa. A boy with a soft voice. I bet he’s a cute one.”

“Could you tell just by his voice, Alicia? But you know, I doubt there’s a boy in all of Roxche as pretty as our baby brother. What was his name?”

“His name? I think it was Seron Maxwell.”

“Maxwell...as in the frozen food with the red packaging?”

“Oh! You might be right. It’s not a common name at all. Then he must be a rich young heir. Let’s invite him over sometime.”

“Let’s do that.”

“Preferably when Nick’s not around.”

“Perfect.”

Chapter 1: Departure

There was a blue planet with a very large moon.

90 percent of the planet was covered in water, and the poles were covered in ice.

There was an oval, potato-shaped continent in the northern hemisphere of that planet.

The southern part of the continent was a brown desert. But as the latitude increased, the land exploded in a splash of green.

There was a massive mountain range in the middle of the continent, beginning at the desert. The mountains, capped with snow even in the middle of summer, ended abruptly about halfway up the continent. The two rivers on either side of the mountain range converged there, creating the massive Lutoni River that flowed straight north and into the sea.

There were two nations on the continent, one on either side.

In the east was the Roxcheanuk Confederation, also known as Roxche. It was made up of 16 member states and territories.

In the west were the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, also known as Sou Be-Il. It was made up of the kingdoms of Bezel and Iltoa, along with a handful of small subordinate countries.

For eons, the people of the East and West had warred against one another with the Lutoni River between them.

In more contemporary times, each side of the continent forged alliances, and Roxche and Sou Be-Il were formed almost simultaneously. What followed was a cold war, one massive war, and many smaller conflicts.

But about 20 years ago, the cold war was ended by a certain incident.

The threat of another Great War was beginning to fade.

The capital of Roxche was the Special Capital District, a region independent of any member state within the confederation.

It was on the northeastern end of Roxche, very far from the East-West border but also a fair distance from the sea.

The Special Capital District was a circular area about 30 kilometers in diameter. It had been built when Roxche was first formed.

The city center was home to the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, civic centers, and courthouses. Outside the center was a business district crowded with department stores and hotels. Further outside was a residential district full of apartment buildings.

And on the outskirts of the Capital District, in the 9 o'clock direction, was Capital West Station.

It was one of the city's three train stations, and also the largest owing to the fact that more of the continent sprawled out to the west.

The station boasted a massive parking lot next to the main intersection, and had a towering glass dome. The dome covered over 10 platforms, and about 20 sets of tracks split off to the west.

Just through the main doors was a vast lobby.

The floor was tiled, and overhead was the great glass dome.

Across from the doors was a line of ticket windows; to the left, a restaurant, and to the right, a pendulum clock about 10 meters in height. Under the face swung the massive pendulum, which could probably kill a man if it fell.

There was a small window cut into the face of the clock, which displayed the eight-day lunar cycle. The display showed a smiling moon indicating that the full moon had just passed.

Benches were arranged under the pendulum clock. There was also a stone monument inscribed with the words ‘Capital West Station Rendezvous Square’.

It was 9:45 in the morning.

The rush hour crowds had cleared out, emptying the lobby. Sounds from announcements and moving trains floated over from the platforms.

The bright summer sun shone through the glass dome, but the wind from the wide-open doors kept the station cool.

Seron Maxwell sat alone on a five-seater bench, reading a book.

Seron was 15 years old, and of average height. He was slender in build, and his long arms and legs made him seem even skinnier.

His slightly long hair was a shiny black. His eyes were grey.

Seron wore beige pants and a white button-down shirt, along with a light black summer jacket.

On his left wrist was a simple but expensive watch. Next to him was his favorite leather suitcase.

As Seron turned the page without a word, a boy with blond hair approached. He wore light brown cargo pants and a green T-shirt. The boy was short, but he had a muscular build.

There was a thin metal chain around his neck—it was not a necklace, but a military identification tag.

Seron did not notice the boy.

The boy—Larry Hepburn—waited one minute, until it was 9:46.

“Hey Seron! How’re you doing?”

There were lines of people waiting for taxis, buses moving in and moving out, and several ordinary cars at the intersection in front of the station.

Most of the cars were small sedans. But parked among them was a limousine.

It clearly stood head-and-shoulders above the others. The limousine was as long as a truck and wide to boot. Its white exterior made it seem difficult to approach.

Larry, and Seron—carrying his suitcase—stepped out of the station and approached the car.

“We don’t need to wait for the others, Larry?”

“Nah. We all met up out here. Lia and Megmica came together, and I ran into Nick just now when we were both getting off our cars. Jenny was waving at us when we got here. You were the only one left, so I went to get you.”

“I see. Is that it over there? The big limousine?”

“Yeah. Megmica’s family’s pretty rich too, but you gotta hand it to Jenny’s folks. This baby’s a top-grade Jones Motors limousine. It’s worth about 10 years of a normal person’s salary,” Larry raved.

The back seats were configured so that six people could sit in rows of three, facing one another. The windows were smoked glass and could not be seen through from the outside.

At the back of the car was a trunk large enough to fit everyone’s luggage, as well as a spare tire.

It was practically tradition in Roxche for cars to rub bumpers, but no one wanted to do such a thing with such an expensive car. The other cars at the intersection gave the limousine a wide berth.

Next to the car stood a man who was clearly a bodyguard.

He was in his forties and had short brown hair. The man wore a black suit, and was tall and well-built. With honed eyes he scanned his surroundings.

When Larry and Seron approached, he bowed courteously.

“This here’s Seron Maxwell,” Larry said to the bodyguard, “He’s the last newspaper club member. Seron, this here’s Jenny’s driver-slash-bodyguard. Mr. Edward Kurtz.”

Seron greeted Kurtz.

Kurtz replied with a bow and a hand over his chest, “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Kurtz first asked if Seron needed to take out anything from his suitcase for the trip, then received the suitcase. Then he opened the door for Seron and Larry and placed a hand at the top of the frame so they would not hit their heads on the way in.

Seron thanked Kurtz and moved—

“Wait, I’m going first.” Larry cut in, forcing his way ahead.

“Huh?”

Furrowing his brow, Seron followed Larry inside.

Thanks to the smoked glass, it was dark inside the car. It took some time for Seron’s eyes to adjust. He took a seat next to Larry, at the rightmost seat facing forward. The other club members greeted him in turn.

“Good morning Seron. You seem to be doing quite well.”

The first voice came from someone on Larry’s left side—a boy with long hair sitting at the leftmost seat that faced forward.

It was Nicholas Browning—Nick—who had fair skin and a slender build. He had silky back-length hair and cool green eyes. As usual, he was easy to mistake for a girl. Today, he was wearing in a simple white button-down shirt and beige pants.

“What took you? New rule: the last one to arrive has to work harder than the rest at the camp. President’s orders.”

The angry second voice came from the leftmost seat facing backwards, across from Nick.

It was Jenny Jones, the petite girl with light brown eyes and short red hair. She was the president of the newspaper club and the daughter of the president of Jones Motors. Today she was dressed comfortably in a red long-sleeved shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Welcome back, Seron. Good thing your train got here on time,” said the tall girl next to Jenny.

It was Natalia Steinbeck, slender and tall with her hair neatly pinned up. She was Larry's childhood friend, and the daughter of the world-renowned Steinbeck musician couple. Larry called her 'Lia', and the other members called her 'Nat'. Today she wore skinny jeans and a white summer sweater.

And finally—

“Good morning, Seron. It has been a while. How are you?”

Next to Natalia, at the rightmost seat facing backwards—in other words, right across from the seat Larry had forced Seron to take—was a certain pigtailed girl.

Her black hair was tied into pigtails with ribbons. She had fair skin and dark eyes, and—though she did not look it—was a year older than the other club members. Strauski Megmica, the Westerner. She was wearing a yellow cotton dress.

The first thing Seron saw when his vision finally adjusted to the dark was Meg's dark eyes, looking straight into his. The smile of the girl he loved most, which he saw for the first time in 17 days.

Seron thanked Larry profusely in silence as he responded blankly and coolly, no different from any other day.

“Good morning, everyone. I'm doing all right. Thanks for asking.”



After placing Seron's suitcase in the trunk, Kurtz walked around to the driver's seat on the left side of the car.

Though Seron could not see, behind Meg—in the passenger seat beside the driver—sat a second bodyguard. A woman in her late twenties with short black hair, dressed neatly in a pantsuit.

There was a window cut into the pane of smoked glass that separated the back of the car from the front.

Kurtz opened the window and advised everyone to put on their seat belts, as they would be departing.

Seron and the others put on their 3-point seat belts and sat back in the comfortable leather seats.

Kurtz asked Jenny if they were ready. Jenny allowed him to set off.

The limousine rumbled as it began to move.

They left the intersection and slowly made their way down a thoroughfare.

Lining either side of the street were endless rows of department stores and hotels. The sepia world beyond the smoked glass passed by them.

"All right. The 3305 newspaper club summer camp is officially in session. This camp will run until we've come back safe and sound to the Capital District. Prepare yourselves for some hardcore training," Jenny announced. "I'm not gonna let any of you drop out, got it? Remember this—covering a news story is like fighting a battle. In fact, it *is* a battle. And there's no justice in battle, did you know that? It doesn't matter if you're covering a total psycho for a story—until he goes to jail, he's simply a subject for you to cover! If you have time to cry, put down your handkerchief and snap a photo instead!"

"Sure, chief. We all know," Natalia said lazily and turned her gaze to Seron. She pointed at the two large paper bags under her feet. "Want something to eat, Seron? We got snacks and fruit—loads for the trip. There's juice and tea too if you want."

"Not right now, thank you. —Jenny, thank you for providing the car and the accommodations," Seron said with utmost gravity.

"Well, well! You get fresh sheets and a crisp new mattress, Seron. The rest of you can have the pick of the gardens or the shed." Jenny grinned. The others—Natalia, Meg, Nick, and Larry—quickly jumped in.

"Thanks for everything, chief! I'm so moved, I can barely stand. Tomorrow I'll compose a song in your honor and give you a live performance."

"Then I will sing this song Nat made. I am too thankful to thank more, Jenny. Thank you."

"Truly, you are the epitome of a benevolent superior. My soul trembles at your generosity, Jenny. Has there ever been such an honorable leader in history?"

"Nope. None at all. I'm happy to fight under such a great commander."

Seron's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked around at the others, who were clearly enjoying themselves too much.

“Too bad. Looks like everyone’s gonna get a bed,” Jenny admitted. At that moment, the limousine made a left turn into a larger street, which had a tram lane down the middle.

Seron spotted the street sign. And he looked around.

Then his eyes fell on something to his left.

“Sarcey Avenue, huh...” he mumbled, awestruck. Larry nodded.

“We’re gonna be invited to the wedding, right?”

“I am already thinking about what to wear on the big day,” Nick chimed in.

“The wedding?” Meg wondered, tilting her head.

“Over there, Megmica,” Natalia said, pointing out a large building on the left side of the limousine.

Meg leaned forward and looked to her right. Not noticing the blank panic rising to Seron’s face as she drew near, Meg scrutinized the building and scanned the sign next to it.

“Ah! Yes! Of course yes! We all will be invited to the wedding! We certainly are!”

As Meg trilled excitedly, the limousine passed by a sign labeled ‘Ulericks Real Estate’.

Afterwards, the club members talked about their summer break so far.

Seron informed everyone that he spent his days reading, relaxing at his home in Weld. He also added that he was almost finished with his homework.

Larry had gone to his family’s villa as planned, where he enjoyed hunting, fishing, boating, motorcycling, and horseback riding, and obviously did not touch his homework.

Meg had met her friend Lillianne Schultz, and had attended a party with other Westerners where she met the fat colonel who quietly thanked her for her help with the Murdoch incident.

Natalia had lazed around at home, playing her instruments—the piano and guitar, not the violin.

Nick had relaxed at home, being teased by his sisters as usual. He had finished his homework.

Finally, Jenny had been hard at work rebuilding the newspaper club.

“What were you working on?” asked Larry.

“Stuff,” Jenny replied.

* * *

The limousine left the perfectly planned roads of the Capital District and entered the Republic of Daurade, a member state of the Roxcheanuk Confederation.

For some time they drove through a suburb inhabited mostly by people who commuted to the Capital District for work.

There was more land available outside the Capital District, so the apartment buildings quickly gave way to detached houses. It was orderly to the point of being boring because the district had been planned meticulously from the bottom up.

Soon, the street led to an interchange—they were approaching the autobahn, which was the highway that connected the cities of Roxche.

The limousine drove up the interchange ramp and into the vast 6-lane highway that made excellent use of the flatlands of Roxche.

Like an airstrip, the asphalt continued endlessly into the horizon in the distance.

The limousine sped up as though gliding. Trees on the side of the road, which had been planted to protect against the wind, seemed to fly past.

Soon the suburbs gave way to nothing but endless green plains.

Farmlands that provided produce to the Capital District stretched on to the horizon.

“Ah, we’re on the autobahn,” Natalia said suddenly. “That means it’s time to bust out the snacks.”

“What’s the autobahn got to do with snacks? Explain in 100 words or less, Lia,” Larry demanded.

“‘Don’t sweat the details, shortie’. I’m gonna run out of words here,” Natalia replied.

That was when Meg threw out a question.

“In Roxchean, the road for cars only is called an autobahn? Then...what country’s language is the autobahn?”

The answer came, not from Larry the machine-lover, but from Nick the history buff.

“It comes from the Casnan language, once used in the nation of Casna at the easternmost tip of Roxche. The word ‘autobahn’ simply means ‘car street’. Casnan was used before the founding of Roxche, but the Confederation Minister of Transportation who planned the autobahn came up with the name ‘autobahn’—perhaps because he was from Casna, or perhaps because he wanted to show off. Or perhaps both. There were other suggestions for the name, such as ‘Transnational Freeway’, ‘Roxche Arterial Expressway’, ‘Confederation Defense Highway’, and ‘High-speed Freeway’. But well, they simply didn’t work quite as well. ‘Autobahn’ is quite elegant in its simplicity.”

“I understand,” Meg gasped. Natalia nodded.

“I’ve been a Roxchean all my life, but I never knew any of that.”

“Let me explain a little more about the autobahn, then,” Nick said, “As Roxche is composed mostly of flatlands, canals have always been the primary method of transportation. From prehistory to now, Roxche has been crisscrossed by canals. This is where the saying ‘Roxche must be crossed by ship’ comes from. But eventually, automobiles were invented and trucks and cars came into common use. With that came the development of highways for ease of long-distance travel. However, this caused some problems. Can anyone guess what they were?”

A moment of silence followed the pop quiz.

But Seron finally answered.

“The canals got in the way.”

“Indeed. I expected no less from you, Seron. The highways that were being built had to cross the canals at points along the construction, which meant the government would have to spend a fortune building bridges over them. Large canals are traversed by equally large ships, which means any bridges that goes over them must be tall enough that such ships’ masts could pass through underneath. Ah, speak of the devil. Look over there—”

Nick pointed out the window on the right.

Outside was a wide canal that intersected with the autobahn.

It was lined on either side with concrete, which had been shaped into a park and a bicycle trail. A large freighter slowly made its way down the water, creating small ripples on the calm surface.

The autobahn climbed just before it reached the water, crossing over at quite a height before descending to the ground again.

The limousine's engine grew louder as they approached the climb.

"Technically, we're not crossing a canal but the Leine River. The Leine and Tarès Rivers are two of the most important rivers in the East, as they supply freshwater to the Capital District. The Leine flows directly into the North Sea, so if you were to set a small boat afloat it would eventually wind up at Port Watts," Nick explained.

Larry chimed in. "True, but that would take days. And FYI, Port Watts is a military facility. You'd get arrested if you wandered in."

"As you can see, wider roads call for wider bridges. Should the architects avoid crossing canals whenever possible, or prioritize straight roads at the extra cost of the bridges? This was what made it so difficult to introduce the autobahn. A similar problem occurred when the railroads were built, but train tracks are narrow and can be raised whenever necessary. The autobahn unfortunately does not have that option. There are quite a few interesting stories about the land supply and the budget wars fought during the planning stages. Supposedly there was even a shipping war between trucks and ships."

"There are no speed limitations on this road, no? When I first heard it, it was very surprising," Meg asked.

"Some areas have speed limits, but generally they don't," Seron explained. "There's a 130 kilometer per hour limit in sections like cities, since there are a lot of interchanges. And in places where they had to add a curve in the highway. But there weren't any limits at all about 20 years ago. You could go as fast as you wanted anywhere. But back when the autobahn was first built, the only cars that could go that fast were either sports cars or really expensive."

"If I remember correctly, there was a terrible accident on the autobahn about 19 years ago. A heated debate followed, after which the speed limits were placed on certain sections," Nick chimed in. Larry nodded.

"Some reckless young driver went so fast he ended up slamming into every car around him. An entire family in one of those cars died, and there was a huge uproar because they were the daughter, son-in-law, and grandson of a former cabinet minister."

"I've seen that article before," said Seron. "In an old newspaper archive, I think. Although I don't remember the minister's name."

Larry continued. "They debated for an entire year, and finally put partial speed limits in place. Funny thing about Roxche—these days lots of cars can go over 200 and people do get into terrible accidents, but the people who demanded a speed limit over the entire autobahn just couldn't beat the no-limit lobbyists."

The moment Larry finished, Natalia spoke.

"That was a great history lesson. Now let's start on the snacks before we forget."

"Just how does history connect to snacks again, Lia?"

"Correction. Let's start on the snacks to make sure we won't forget."

Their stash included the Capital District's infamously greasy deep-fried crisps, assorted chocolates, potato chips which had only recently hit the market, salami, scone and jam, raisins, gum, candy, and tea and juice in thermoses and small bottles respectively.

The newspaper club chattered away as they opened up one snack after another.

“Is there anything else you wanted to know about Roxche, Megmica? Seron or Nick could probably answer anything for you. I could help out if you’ve got any questions about the military,” Larry said for Seron, who was having trouble talking to her.

Natalia provided support fire. “Great idea. Ask ‘em while you can. ‘Why, when, and how did Larry grow out of being a crybaby?’ That kinda stuff.”

“Never mind that, Lia.”

Afterwards, the conversation turned into a question-and-answer session with Meg and the Roxcheans.

The first topic of discussion was the Eastern educational system. They discussed the secondary school system and how it served simply as a stepping stone towards postsecondary education, and also discussed vocational schools.

Education had always been a primary concern for Roxcheans, and in the East it was natural for children to receive extracurricular education. This was completely foreign to Meg.

“It is very surprising. And—”

Another system that Meg found strange was the option to skip a grade, which existed even for primary school students in Roxche.

In Sou Be-II, it was thought that students should not be separated by their academic performance from such a young age. But in Roxche, clever students were allowed to move on quickly through their education.

Then came the question of why Jenny, who was one of the top 10 students in their school, had not skipped a grade.

“Tell us if it’s not too much trouble, chief,” Natalia urged. Jenny replied nonchalantly.

“Hmm... I never really thought that hard about it. I only have six years in secondary school, so I might as well get the full experience, right? It’s like reading a novel instead of just getting a summary.”

“Gotcha.”

Outside the windows they could see a vast wetland. The conversation naturally moved on to the environment.

“The Razen wetlands. It is home to countless species of waterfowl, and thanks to its proximity to the Capital District it’s known as a holy ground of birdwatching. Supposedly you’ll find quite the crowd on holidays.”

“They passed a protection law,” Larry added, “So hunting’s completely illegal in this area. In the old days, locals used to hunt birds for their meat and feathers, but they all went out of business afterwards. They’re the reason people in the Capital District call down jackets ‘Razens’.”

The conversation drifted to the differences between laws in Roxche and Sou Be-II.

In Roxche, cars drove on the right side of the road and the driver’s seat was on the left side of the car. In Sou Be-II it was the opposite.

As for minimum drinking age, every member state of Roxche had set it at 20. In Sou Be-II, the minimum age had been lowered recently to 18, but depending on the region and type of drink, people could even consume alcohol at 14.

Natalia was awestruck. “Fourteen? That’s ridiculous. I think I want to become a Westerner.”

“We raise toasts for high school graduation with wines together,” said Meg.

“Egad! Larry, I’m going West!”

“Whatever.”

Then came the issue of gun control. In Roxche, citizens could possess weapons—even tanks or anti-aircraft weapons—as long as they passed an admissions process and paid an expensive licensing fee. But in Sou Be-Il, only soldiers and law enforcement personnel could possess guns, with very few exceptions.

They discussed several more differences, before Meg brought up an interesting topic.

“Now that I think to it, this is a very important fact—”

She explained that in the West, there was a lese-majesty law. That is, one could be prosecuted if they were caught insulting the royal family of Bezel or Iltoa in public. Then she added,

“But it is not a very heavy crime. This law is slowly losing powers.”

“I see. Looks like us Roxcheans had better be careful if we ever decide to visit.”

“It is all right. I told you before, I can follow you as interpreter for you,” Meg said with a smile. Seron’s thought processes froze for a full three minutes.

Afterwards, it came up that in Sou Be-Il, first-cousin marriage was strictly illegal. The Roxcheans could not hide their shock.

“Huh. It’s not that uncommon in Roxche, you know. Rich people actually prefer to marry their kids to cousins, since they can guarantee a good background,” Natalia said.

“Hmph.” Jenny frowned, putting a potato chip in her mouth. But no one noticed.

“Speaking of laws,” Nick said, “I’ve heard recently that the death penalty has been abolished completely in the West. Is it true, Megmica?”

“Abolished?”

“Ah. It means the penalty is no longer used.”

“Yes. It has. Some decades before, one person was murdered on schedule and afterwards no one was executed,” Meg said solemnly.

Natalia finished off the cookies and said, “‘Murdered’, huh. That’s a scary word to use, but guess it’s not wrong.”

“Then what about really bad people?” Larry asked, a piece of chewing gum in his mouth. “Like serial killers, for example?”

“Well...in that case, the crime adds one on top of one, and the...prison term? Is it the right word? The time he must be in prison goes up very very high. To 200 or 300 years.”

Larry and the others, including Seron—who had just come back to his senses—nodded.

Meg continued. “Several years before, a serial killer man who killed many many children was arrested by the policemen. It was a big talk of the country. Sou Be-Il was very loud. The man received more than 400 years, during the court. He can never leave the prison, and he can never kill other people now, but he is still alive.”

The others were appalled. Nick seemed extremely curious.

“It boggles the mind to think that even such a terrible man was spared the death penalty. It does make me wonder—the death penalty has been around for all of human history. What led Sou Be-Il to deviate from the traditional norm?”

“Back then, my teacher at the school told us many things,” Meg said gravely, “We did not know if he should be killed. The parents of the killed children sent many letters to the king and asked to kill the man but the laws did not change. ...But you see, when someone who killed someone dies, he will certainly go to hell. Everyone knows he will. Is there ‘hell’ in Roxche?”

Natalia nodded. “Yeah. This old lady used to tell me I’d go to hell someday if I misbehaved.”

Larry shared a similar experience. Then Seron spoke for the first time in a while.

“A lot of people in Roxche think so too. Most kids grow up being taught that bad people go to hell. That’s why some people think the death penalty isn’t necessary. I’m sure there are people in Sou Be-Il who want to bring back the death penalty, just like the opposite is true in Roxche.”

“It is true. There are many people in this world,” Meg said, nodding again and again.

The limousine went quiet. Nick spoke up.

“I suppose that may have been too serious of a topic. Perhaps we should move on to something more lighthearted? Seron.”

“Hm?”

“I’ve always been curious to know. How in the world does the Maxwell lamb sauté dinner with black pepper taste so good when all you have to do is simply heat it in the oven?”

“...The president—my mother—once told me, ‘if anyone in the Capital District asks, tell them this’.”

“Yes?”

Nick and the others listened with bated breath as Seron revealed the secret.

“It tastes so good because it’s made with a mother’s love.”

“That is wonderful! Seron’s mother is a cool woman!” Meg exclaimed.

“We’ve reached a rest stop, everyone. We’ll refuel and take a short break,” said the woman sitting in the front, opening up the window in the partition.

The limousine left the autobahn and pulled up into a parking lot surrounded by trees.

Jenny introduced the woman to Seron, and vice-versa.

The woman was named Elsa Litner. She stepped off the car first and scanned the area. Then she escorted Jenny and the girls to the bathroom.

“We’re fine. We’re not as famous.” Larry turned down Kurtz’s offer to escort the boys. He, Seron, and Nick dropped by the bathroom and headed to the store.

“Lia was really stuffing herself, eh? How’s she gonna eat lunch?” Larry grumbled, personally paying to refill their stash of snacks.

The moment they stepped out of the store, they ran into the girls. Larry handed the heavy paper bag to Natalia.

“Good thinking, Larry.”

As they returned to the limousine together, Meg looked up at the blue sky.

“It is very fun. It is very fun that everyone has come to this far place, and that everyone must go farther. It is very good.”

Three meters behind Meg, Seron silently but intensely agreed.

“No group photos?” Larry asked Jenny.

“Not if it’s not newsworthy.”

“Oh! That is not good. Even if the photo is not newsworthy, the photo will be a cool memory. So take a photo please, Jenny.”

“Megmica’s right. Club history’s gotta be newsworthy, right?” Natalia added.

Jenny shrugged. “All right. Once we get to the villa.”

Once the tank was full, the limousine left the rest stop and returned to the autobahn.

There were fewer cars on the road now. And as if to match, there was one fewer lane. The landscape around them seemed to go on forever, like a strip of grey on a massive green carpet.

The limousine signaled and changed lanes to overtake the car ahead.

“Look,” Larry exclaimed, “A road train.”

Meg and Natalia—who had been eating yet another cookie—looked to their right.

A train of trailers seemed to flow by.

Three trailers connected by metal bars were being pulled behind a single tractor unit.

Black smoke spewed from the tractor unit, which roared loudly enough to hear from inside the limousine.

“It’s long,” Seron observed.

“Yeah.” Larry nodded, his eyes glued to the passing trailers. “They’re actually not allowed in the Capital District because of that. You don’t get to see them much.”

“Were road trains not determined to be less efficient than trains about six months ago? Road trains can get in the way because of their length, so I don’t believe we’ll be seeing many more of them now,” Nick pointed out.

Larry turned. “You know a lot of obscure things, huh. Yeah. In terms of fuel efficiency it’s best to cover long distances by train and use regular-sized trucks the rest of the way. They’ve partially implemented a standard on shipping container sizes, and once it’s fully in effect the shipping industry’s going to switch over completely.”

“This is a bore,” Natalia said. Meg also showed little interest, her eyes on the truck disappearing behind them.

At that moment, Meg’s eyes met Seron’s. She smiled.

‘All hail road trains!’

‘Let road trains drive Roxche’s autobahns forever!’

In his heart, Seron heaped praises upon the endangered species.

About an hour past noon, the limousine left the autobahn again.

They drove down a road through a farmland before coming to a stop at a large drive-thru restaurant in town. The students and the bodyguards went into the room that Kurtz had reserved ahead of time.

“There’s no hurry, so please take your time.”

The adults left the room and the students sat at the table. Then came the food.

For lunch, they would have the restaurant's specialty—the build-it-yourself burger.

Diners were provided soft buns straight out of the oven, fresh vegetables, the local specialty cheese, meat patties dripping with juice served on a small grill, and other ingredients and garnishes with which to dress their lunch.

"I'm going all-out!"

Larry spread butter over his bun, then expertly added a patty, salt and pepper, tomato slices, cheese, lettuce, onion slices, mayonnaise, a drop of mustard, a bun slice, butter, another patty, salt, pepper, cheese, tomato slices, pickles, and ketchup. Then he covered the top and put a long skewer through the burger for ease of eating.

"It's on, Larry."

Natalia made the same hamburger, except without pickles and onion slices and with extra mayonnaise.

"No way I'm going that far. 'Sides, I like raw onions."

Jenny piled a meat patty and onion slices onto her bun and finished without adding any other ingredients.

"You three are astounding. I'm still quite full from all the snacks."

"So am I. But I like hamburgers. Before, in Sou Be-Il, it was against politeness to eat your food with your hands."

Nick and Meg opted for plain burgers. Bun, butter, patty, assorted vegetables, pickles, and ketchup.

Seron was last.

"What should I do?" he wondered, picking up a bun.

Larry was already finished his first burger. He replied with mayonnaise on his lip, "Don't think about it too hard, Seron. Just make it simple."

"... Yeah. Thanks, Larry."

Seron made the same plain hamburger Meg made.

And he happily dug into the same hamburger the girl he loved was eating.

Inwardly, Larry chuckled. He got to building his second burger.

"I'mma add another patty this time!"

"Three for me!"

After the burgers, the newspaper club members had chocolate ice cream for dessert followed by warm tea.

And the limousine set off once more, carrying six utterly stuffed students.

They sped down the empty autobahn again.

It was neither cold nor hot inside the limousine, and the seats were comfortable and impact-absorbent. The engine hummed peacefully.

As a result—

"Figures," Larry muttered.

Nick, Jenny, Natalia, and Meg were all asleep. Nick and Jenny leaned against their respective windows, Natalia sat with her head tilted all the way back, and Meg with her head slightly bowed.

"Maybe I should get some shut-eye too."

Larry turned. To his right sat Seron, desperately trying to keep his eyes open.

“Didn’t you say you didn’t get much sleep on the train last night, Seron?”

“Oh. Yeah. But...”

Larry looked at Seron, then at Meg. Seron sat nervously, and Meg slept peacefully. Seron’s dilemma was clear.

“Look, buddy. I know how you feel, but this is only the first day. If you rush, you’re gonna drive yourself into an early grave.”

“That’s not good... I’ll get some sleep.”

“Yeah. Relax, man. Take your time.”

“It looks like they’re all asleep,” Litner said, glancing back from her seat.

“Right, then.”

Kurtz slowed the limousine slightly and steadied his driving.

A short while later, he spoke again.

“I’m surprised that even Miss Jenny’s fallen asleep. She must really trust these friends of hers.”

“You’re right. I couldn’t believe she made five friends at once, personally.”

“*And* she’s taking them to Ercho Village. You think she’s gotten over her heartbreak?”

“I doubt it. I doubt she’ll ever get over it completely.”

“Is that a woman’s perspective, Elsa? I don’t think I’ll ever understand.”

The limousine continued due north.

Chapter 2: Ercho Village

“I slept so well,” said Jenny.

“Yes. I slept very much as well,” said Meg.

“I woke up sometimes and got so lonely that I ate more snacks. Alone,” said Natalia.

“I’m not gonna say anything, Lia,” said Larry.

“I see that expensive seats are very good for the back,” said Nick.

“It was comfortable,” said Seron.

The limousine finally arrived at Ercho Village.

It was technically evening, but the days were long in the summer and the sun was still up.

Ercho Village had a population of about 30,000. It was large for a village, but not large enough to be a city.

About 90 percent of its vast lands were flat pastures and fields. There was a small cluster of stores at the center of the village, where the village hall was.

Winding country roads lined with trees twisted across the village. Naturally, there were no street lamps.

The villa district followed the country roads. Each property made good use of the vast lands, with hundreds of meters between any given building and the next—sometimes the houses were so far they could not see their next-door neighbors.

Jenny’s relatives’ villa was a luxury mansion in that area.

The building was 30 meters wide and three stories tall. With its white walls and orange roofs, it exuded cheer.

Next to the building was a wooden garage. The door was shut.

Summer flowers were in full bloom in the well-kept garden, and birds were chirping in the distance.

The limousine passed through the gates and soon stopped at the door.

The newspaper club members spilled out of the limousine from both sides. It was not particularly warm, but not as windy as the Capital District. They were enveloped by a cool, refreshing air.

“Whoa, not bad,” Natalia said. That was when she noticed the middle-aged couple coming over and greeted them.

The man and the woman were both in their fifties, and both dressed in checkered shirts of different colors and cargo pants. Both were plump and looked very kind.

“Welcome, welcome! You must have had a long trip,” said the woman, turning to Jenny. “It’s been so long, Miss Jenny. I’m glad to see you’re well. Your new hairstyle suits you.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” Jenny replied. “Thanks for having us over.”

With an uncharacteristically bright smile, Jenny introduced the couple to the newspaper club.

“This is Mr. and Mrs. Ruf. They’ve been a big help to us for years. We’re practically family.”

Then she introduced the newspaper club and the bodyguards to the couple. The students gave courteous greetings, and the bodyguards flashed their IDs.

“Thank you for coming all this way, everyone. Welcome to Ercho Village. Would you care for some tea to start off the trip? We’ll take you to your rooms afterwards,” Mrs. Ruf offered.

Seron and the others were led into a large sitting room on the first floor. Kurtz and Litner carried their luggage up to their rooms first.

Marveling at the beautiful flowers outside the window, the newspaper club members lazily drank tea with milk from a local farm.

Mrs. Ruf gave them a brief introduction to the villa.

They were free to go anywhere within the blue fences, which marked the villa property. The villa kept two horses in the back which they could ride for long distances. There were a dozen bicycles on hand thanks to the recent cycling boom. There were two motorcycles in the garage as well, for anyone with a license.

“Me! I’ve got one! Up to 300cc, ma’am!” Larry cried, raising his hand. In Roxche, new motorcycle riders had to comply with an engine displacement limit.

After tea, the students were led to their rooms. Each room was almost too big for one person.

There was a double bed with a canopy and lace curtains, luxurious sofas, a rose-colored vanity, a dresser, and a fluffy carpet.

The walls were painted a calming white. Each room was adorned with different paintings by the same artist.

“Ah, I recognize this artist. It—”

“Never mind, Nick. I’m not sure I want to know how much it costs.”

Each room had its own bathroom with a porcelain bathtub. Beyond the balcony they had a view of the flowers in the garden and the gentle plains in the distance.

The boys’ rooms were on the second floor, and the girls’ rooms on the third. Kurtz and Litner had their own rooms on the first floor.

“Don’t you dare sneak up here at night, Larry,” Natalia teased.

“Huh? Why would I do that?” Larry asked obliviously.

* * *

The sky was aglow with dusk, and everyone had gotten rested in their own rooms.

“Seron! Dinner!”

“Be right there.”

Larry and the others were waiting outside. The newspaper club headed to the large dining room on the first floor.

There was an unused fireplace in the dining room, and a long 20-seater table before it. The newspaper club sat at one end, with the boys on one side and the girls on the other just like in the club office.

Bread, vegetables, juice, tea, and the appetizer were already set on the table. And—

“Our main dish tonight will be chicken steamed in white wine served with anchovy sauce.”

Mrs. Ruf rolled in the main course on a cart.

On the plate were sautéed drumsticks steamed in white wine.

Then came the sauce—a mixture of anchovy and herbs stir-fried in olive oil. The sauce was served in a small pot and placed atop a burner to keep it warm.

“It smells very delicious,” said Meg, “In truth, I love anchovy very much. Although my rest of the family members hate anchovy.”

“Looks good. Can we have seconds?” asked Natalia.

“You haven’t even started, Lia. I want seconds too, though,” Larry added.

“The butter looks delicious as well. And very fresh,” Nick commented.

“It was probably made today. And with whipped cream too—the simplest and best,” Seron said.

“Good eye, Seron. I bet Uncle was working hard on this today.”

They started eating.

They finished eating.

“I’m stuffed. I can barely move,” said Jenny, “Now how am I gonna put you through training?”

Seron replied, “Let’s save it for tomorrow, Jenny. Training aside, the butter was incredible. Frozen food just can’t compete.”

“It was all delicious,” said Nick. “I particularly enjoyed the asparagus.”

“That was some good food. I’ll get some muscle training done once I digest this,” said Larry.

“Looking forward to the rest of the camp. So what’re we getting for midnight snacks?” Natalia asked.

“Thank you for the meal,” said Meg.

* * *

The sun set completely. It was nighttime.

“Tonight, I’ll teach you to use a camera! All of you change into your gym uniforms and gather back here!” Jenny cried in the sitting room.

“Why the uniforms?” asked Larry.

“Because it’s a club activity,” Jenny replied.

Once the members gathered in identical clothes (save for the names embroidered onto them), Jenny laid out a cloth over the thick table. Then she took out a camera from her trunk and placed it on the cloth.

“We’re starting with the camera! I expect everyone to have the instructions memorized tonight, ‘cause tomorrow we’re going on a photography outing!”

“That’s quite the collection you’ve brought with you.”

Just as Nick said, there were nearly 10 cameras on the table.

They were rangefinders that used standard 35mm film. There was also an array of over 20 lenses, from wide-angle to telephoto.

Then there were over a hundred rolls of unused black-and-white film, and six photometers for measuring light intensity.

Although cameras had become more popularized, a middle-class family would be lucky to have one at home. And here lay 10 of them on the table before their eyes.

“Man...these probably add up to a small fortune,” Larry speculated.

“Listen up! News photography is *not* art! We don’t need any long artist statements or droning explanations! Our priority is to take clear, focused pictures anyone can understand instantly!”

Jenny Jones’s Photography Class was in session.

First, they learned to use the photometer.

An experienced photographer could tell how much light there was on a sunny day or a cloudy day, but that was not possible for a newbie.

It was annoying, but they had always to check the exposure with the photometers and refer to the measurements. Because the meters were small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand, they had to hang them around their necks in case they dropped it. And when they were not using the photometers, they had to keep them inside a leather case to prevent the solar batteries from overheating.

“It is elegant and cute,” Meg commented, examining the brown leather cases.

Then Jenny taught them how to adjust the exposure—in other words, how much light to let into the camera.

They needed to know three things in order to accurately set the exposure. The sensitivity of the film, the lens setting, and the shutter speed.

“You’re going too fast, chief. Wait up for us,” Natalia complained. Jenny nodded.

“I’ll go in order.”

The sensitivity of the film was exactly what it sounded like. It was how sensitively the film reacted to light.

The more sensitive the film, the faster the shutter speed had to be. But that had the downside of making the photograph look more grainy. It was the opposite with less sensitive film. Naturally, the sensitivity remained the same throughout the duration of the roll.

In this case, Jenny had only brought film with a rating of 125. So there was no need to worry about the sensitivity this time. However, they had to remember to set the sensitivity rating on their photometers to 125.

“What about the cost of the film and the development?” asked Seron.

“Club expenses,” Jenny replied.

Then she taught them about lens settings—that is, how to adjust the amount of light that came in through the lens.

There was an aperture inside the camera, which could be widened or narrowed. The position of the aperture was measured by f-stops. The more the aperture was widened, the more light was let in. However, there was a certain point at which no more light could be allowed inside.

Another variable to note was that the more the aperture was widened, the less they could focus on. Because this technique made the background blurry, it was a good choice for photographing people or flowers to put them in the spotlight.

On the other hand, when the aperture was narrowed they could focus on a wider range—for example, they could take a photo of the villa with the landscape behind it all in full focus.

“Technically you can only focus on one distance, but when you narrow the aperture you can see it because everything widens. It’s called depth of field.”

“What’s that now? You lost me, chief.” Natalia furrowed her brow. Seron stepped in.

“Nat, take off your glasses.”

“Hm? Sure. ...All right. I can’t see a thing now.”

“What happens when you squint? Or try holding your thumb and index finger in a circle in front of your eye.”

“Oh, I do that all the time. I can see a bit better that way.”

“And if you do that, sometimes you can read letters that are just borderline blurry, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what happens when you increase the depth of field.”

“Aha! Gotcha. I get it now.” Natalia nodded. “In other words, I was born to be a photographer.”

“I can’t even tell if that was a joke,” Larry remarked.

Jenny continued.

A deep depth of field could be convenient, but the more the aperture was narrowed, the less light hit the film. And that meant they needed a slower shutter speed to match.

The shutter speed was the amount of time the shutter was open for—the amount of time light was allowed to hit the film.

With a high shutter speed, even a moving subject could be photographed as though it was still. With a low shutter speed, they could take photos of dimmer subjects or with a narrower aperture, but they would have to set the camera on a tripod—otherwise the photograph would turn out completely blurred.

In terms of shutter speed, there was a certain threshold they could not cross as long as they were shooting without a tripod. So they had to keep the aperture wide enough with that in mind.

“This camera has six shutter speed options. 1/500 of a second, 1/250 of a second, 1/100 of a second, 1/50 of a second, and 1/25 of a second. And then there’s the bulb setting.”

“And what might that be?” asked Nick.

“It means the shutter is open for as long as your finger’s on the shutter button.”

“I see. So it is only used in conjunction with a tripod.”

“Yeah. I gave you all handhelds, so just stick to 1/50 and you’ll be fine. If you think you’ll need a lower speed, widen the aperture. I’ll teach you to use the strobe later.”

Once they had a set exposure, it was time to adjust focus. All the measuring in the world couldn’t help if the image was out of focus.

“Hey! I take offense to that, Larry Hepburn!” Natalia hissed, pushing up her glasses.

“I haven’t said ‘completely nearsighted’ or ‘blind without ‘em’ yet, Lia,” Larry replied.

“What’s that, shortie? C’mon out here. Let’s settle this like gentlemen.”

“I’ll pass. Have fun stargazing alone, Lia. It’s real romantic out there.”

“Save the duel to the death for later, you two. Let’s get back to the lesson.”

With a rangefinder camera, they had to turn the focus ring while looking through the viewfinder. If the object at the center of the viewfinder seemed to be doubling, the image was out of focus. They had to turn the ring until the image consolidated.

Finally, Jenny explained composition.

For example, there was no point to photographing a person if his face was not in the shot. And there was no point to a landscape if the image was tilted.

They had to adjust the angle or switch out lenses depending on what and how they wanted to photograph.

Jenny then added that they had to be careful with the cameras, as they were very delicate pieces of equipment. That they had to hang the cameras on straps around their necks at all times, and that they should not get so engrossed that they end up walking backwards with an eye on the viewfinder.

“Speaking from experience, Jenny?” asked Nick. Jenny admitted that she had done such a thing several times.

Seron quickly and efficiently took down an outline of the lesson. Then he copied out his notes for the others.

It was getting late. The world outside was pitch-black, as the moon had not yet risen. It had gotten cold, even though everyone was in their gym uniforms.

“I see. I barely understand to use it now. At the same time, I think I know why my father never gave me a camera for me. I will carry around Seron’s memo with me always.”

Everyone, including the technologically-challenged Meg, had grasped the basics of photography.

“I’ll teach you the rest tomorrow. Nothing like a test run to really learn all this stuff. Let’s shoot lots,” Jenny finished, sweat on her brow from her fervent lecture.

“You didn’t teach us to load and unload the film.” Seron pointed out.

“...Tomorrow! Dismissed!”

The first day of the camp came to an end.

The newspaper club members slowly climbed the central staircase. Natalia was yawning.

“Long day, huh. Gonna get some good rest tonight, I bet.”

“It is good that I can sleep in a very princess-like bed tonight,” said Meg.

“I get the distinct feeling that you might find such beds at Seron’s home, no?” Nick wondered.

Seron replied, “Leena—my sister—used to have one, but she tried to climb the canopy and it broke. So not anymore.”

“What do you guys say to a 10-kilometer run at the crack of dawn?” asked Jenny.

“What, are we the military now?” Larry chuckled. “I don’t mind if you guys are up for it.”

“No.” “Me neither, please...” Natalia and Meg were quick to object.

“Too bad.” Jenny sighed. “Well, just be up before breakfast tomorrow. I’m not too keen on getting up too early, either.”

The boys stepped back from the staircase.

“Well then, have a good night.” Meg waved as she went up to the third floor.

Seron watched her, on and on until she was finally out of sight.

Larry was distinctly reminded of a dramatic farewell scene straight out of a film, but he waited for Seron without a word. As did Nick.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Larry turned to the empty hallway.

“What might be the matter, Larry?” Nick asked, surprised.

“Hm. I thought I heard something break just now. Was it just my imagination? ...Gotta be, right?”

Larry shrugged.

Then he gave Seron a tap on the shoulder, snapping him out of his daze.

“Let’s go, buddy. There’s always tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

Just a single step before reaching the third floor, Natalia froze.

“What’s wrong?” “Is everything all right?”

Jenny and Meg asked from behind.

“I heard a toaster oven break just now. Wonder what’s happening,” Natalia said. “Well, none of my business. Mr. Kurtz’ll notice if anything happens,” she concluded, continuing up the stairs.

* * *

The 2nd day of the eighth month.

It was early morning on the second day of the camp.

Seron opened his eyes unbidden. He woke up at the same time as the previous day, an hour before the sleeper train reached the Capital District.

The sun shone brightly, creeping between the curtains. It was a clear day.

Seron was in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. He climbed out of bed and scratched his messy hair as he headed to the bathroom. He had showered the previous night, so he simply washed his face and brushed his teeth before changing into long pants and a button-down shirt.

There was still time before breakfast. Seron wondered what he should do.

“Right. The camera.”

He thought to review Jenny’s lesson, but he realized that the cameras were all down in the sitting room.

With nothing else to do, Seron drew the curtains, opened the glass door, and stepped out onto the balcony.

The sun was still low near the horizon, but shining brightly. The sky was still a dark blue. There was almost no wind.

Cradled in the pleasantly cool air and the scent of grass, Seron walked forward. He placed his hands on the railing.

“Oh? Seron.”

He heard someone’s voice.



Seron looked down. There, between the flower beds, stood Meg.

However—

“Huh?”

Seron froze, failing to recognize the figure in the gardens.

Meg was wearing a white dress, but she was wearing her hair down instead of in her usual pigtails.

“I also woke up early this morning.”

Five seconds of staring later, Seron finally recognized the girl he loved.

“H-hey there! Good morning.”

“Yes, it is a very good morning. I am down here to walk the gardens for a short moment. Would you like to walk too, Seron?”

“I-I’ll be right there!”

Seron tightened his grip to leap over the railing.

And just as he prepared to spring forward, he realized that something was wrong and stopped himself.

Quietly but very quickly Seron descended the central staircase. He had never walked so fast in his entire life, he thought. As soon as he was out the door, he ran to Meg’s side.

She was squatting in front of a bed of red flowers. But when she noticed his presence, Meg stood and smiled, her long hair aflutter.

“The weather is very good today as well.”

“...Yes. And you?”

“Hm? Is my Roxchean speaking wrong?”

“No, wait. Sorry. My bad. I must be half-asleep. I’m sorry, Megmica. The weather certainly is great today.”

“Indeed it is very good! As we are awake early, let us walk this wonderful garden!”

Stiffly, but desperately putting on a blank front, Seron went over to Meg’s left side.

They slowly began to stroll through the garden of flower beds, lawns, and trees.

Seron kicked his sputtering thought processes into high gear.

“Y-you know, your hair. It surprised me a little,” he confessed, unable to think of anything else.

“Oh. I walked outside after I slept and woke up in the morning like this. I think it would be okay to untie my hair like this. I will tie them again later. It is very uncomfortable when I move.”

“Huh? Yeah. You’re right. It could get in the way when you’re using a camera...” Seron rationalized against his will.

“Yes! It could,” Meg agreed brightly and obliviously.

With her finger Meg played with her hair. Seron could see her profiled face. Blinking, he kept his gaze on her.

“At the school in Sou Be-Il which I attended, it was the law to tie students’ hair in pigtails.”

“I see.”

“My school was a girls school. All the students were girls. And the hairstyle was not free, like the school now. I thought it was very not free, at the time.”

“Right. Roxche’s pretty easygoing about things like that.”

“Yes. It was very surprising. But after coming to Roxche, pigtails were comfortable for some reason so I still tie the pigtails. My friend Lillia says for me to use different hairstyles, but still.”

“I guess it’s hard to break out of your comfort zone,” Seron said plainly, although in his head he was determined to have a serious discussion about Meg’s hairstyle with this friend named Lillia.

“Yes. Thinking of which, I want to take Lillia to Sou Be-Il with me some day. Everyone will be surprised when I take a Roxchean whose Bezelese speaking is better than mine.”

Seron inhaled, readied himself, and spoke in Bezelese.

“I studied, Bezelese, a little.”

“Oh my goodness! It is very surprising. As expected, you are amazing, Seron.”

“It is a very difficult language. I was very surprised,” Seron managed in faltering but polite Bezelese, before switching back. “Sorry. That’s about as far as I can go. The conjugation is so difficult that all I can do is memorize entire sentences. The pronunciation is tough, and I had a hard time remembering genders for nouns.” He shook his head.

“Then I will speak a little,” Meg said, looking at Seron. “You’re always full of surprises, Seron. I feel like I could learn so much from you.”

“What does that mean? I caught my name, but everything else was a blur.”

Meg took a moment to translate her thoughts into Roxchean, then simplified her sentiment.

“I said, ‘you are very cool, Seron!’”

Seron’s thought processes came grinding to a halt, restored only once he heard Meg’s concerned voice several seconds later.

Afterwards, they had uneventful conversations about the flowers in the gardens and the sights they saw on the autobahn the previous day.

“Shine on, Seron. I am so proud of you!” Larry whispered from his balcony, still in his T-shirt. Because Meg and Seron were walking side-by-side at the other end of the garden, he could not hear what they were talking about.

“Agreed. Now why can’t you ever manage that?” someone said from above him.

“Tch.”

Larry scowled and looked up.

Natalia leaned against the railing of her balcony. Her hair was even longer than Meg’s.

“That’s long.”

“Yeah. Wanna try climbing it?”

“No thanks. Isn’t it annoying to wash and dry it all?”

“Yeah. It’s such a bother.”

“Ever think about cutting it short like me?”

“If I feel like it.”

There wasn't a hint of romance to be found in the conversation. Natalia looked out at the gardens.

"Hm. Maybe I should get down there and have some fun."

"Don't you dare get in their way, Lia," Larry said, his eyes glinting.

"Heh. Can't even joke around with you. I'mma head in and wash my hair." Natalia said, walking back inside.

Larry sighed. Before he knew it, Nick was standing on the balcony next door.

"It is considered bad form to get in the way of a romance," he said without even a greeting.

Larry turned. Nick stood there wearing light green pajamas and a strangely adorable black nightcap with golden stars.

"Yeah. Morning."

"Good morning. It seems like we have quite the exciting day ahead."

* * *

"Then I will see you at breakfast time."

"Yeah. See you."

After a stroll through the gardens, Seron said goodbye to Meg at the stairs and headed back to his own room. But just as he passed Larry's door—

"Good job."

"Whoa!"

Seron flinched. The door was ajar.

"...Larry, can I come in?"

"Sure thing, buddy."

As soon as Larry shut the door behind them, Seron let his emotions tint his voice—but not his face.

"D-d-did you see, Larry? Nothing beats Megmica with her hair down!"

"I only saw her from afar, but yeah. That's one of the privileges of being in the same club," Larry replied.

His fists trembling, Seron looked up at the ceiling.

"I can die happy now."

"Let's not get too ahead of ourselves."

* * *

It was time for breakfast. The newspaper club was gathered in the dining room.

Larry was in his usual T-shirt and a grey parka. Nick was wearing pants similar to Seron's, along with a white button-down shirt. Jenny was in navy shorts and a long-sleeved shirt. Natalia wore long pants and a light green summer sweater.

They had a traditional Roxchean breakfast that morning—bacon and eggs with bread, vegetables, and fruits. It all tasted wonderful. The butter was as good as it had been the previous night.

Everyone was more than satisfied with breakfast. Larry downed glass after glass of milk.

"The milk is great. More please!"

"Good to see you're taking in all that calcium. You've still got hope, shortie."

"Shut up, Lia."

"This weather will last all day," said Mrs. Ruf, bringing in tea. "How would you like to have a barbecue in the gardens for dinner?"

The newspaper club agreed with gusto. Mrs. Ruf promised to prepare meat and vegetables for the barbecue.

"I can help! Outdoor cooking is my specialty," Larry volunteered. Seron joined in as well, followed by Nick. In the end, everyone signed up to help prepare dinner.

Mrs. Ruf took down everyone's requests for the barbecue. And once she was gone—

"Good morning, everyone."

Kurtz and Litner entered the kitchen. Kurtz asked Jenny about her plans for the day.

"Today, we're going around town by bicycle for some photography practice. Lunch will be at the local specialty spaghetti place by the village hall. Could you make reservations for eight? We've got a couple of big eaters. We'll drop off our film at a photography studio and come back here, and if we have time we'll learn to use typewriters or take a nap. We'll have a barbecue in the evening and another lesson at night, if we have time."

Kurtz nodded in understanding. Larry spoke up.

"We're not gonna develop the photos ourselves? I was looking forward to that."

"We don't have a darkroom here. Believe me, I wish we could develop them too. But we'll focus just on photography this time. I'll give you a lesson on the darkroom once we get back."

"Right. And about going into town... are the six of us gonna go on six bikes together?"

"That's the plan. Why?" Jenny asked. All eyes were on Larry.

"I have another idea. Can we split off into three pairs? We don't all have to crowd around together. I know I'm being kinda selfish, but I want to race around town on a motorcycle today. I can give someone a ride behind me, so the rest of you can pair off and have free time until lunch. It's no fun if everyone takes photos of the same thing."

"You gotta do what I say! —Is what I wanted to say, but that sounds fine as long as everyone does some photography. So who's going with you? Obviously, I'm gonna decline."

"Looks like it's gotta be me, then," Natalia said with a shrug. "I'm too lazy to bike. It'd be nice to have a slave take me everywhere by motorcycle."

"Who're you calling a slave, Lia? Fine. It's the two of us, then."

Larry and Natalia were working in perfect sync. Nick joined in. "Then could I perhaps work with you for the morning, Jenny? I'm not quite clear on the specifics about photography, I'm afraid. And I'm sure Megmica will be fine with Seron, as he knows all the details about camera use."

Only then did Seron realize that Larry, Natalia, and Nick were doing their best to help him. Blankly and silently he heaped praises and thanks upon them.

"Hmm. All right." Jenny nodded. "Is that all right with you, Megmica?"

"Yes. It is very fine with me."

Completely oblivious to the implications, Meg agreed with a smile.

“Good. Then I’ll hand out maps of the area to everyone. We meet at noon today in town. All the boys have watches, right? The rendezvous point is the fountain in Huckanee Memorial Park in the center of the village. It’s on the map, and you can ask people for directions. The park is about 3 kilometers away, and there are almost no slopes on the way there so it won’t be tough to get there by bike. And don’t go snacking before we meet—we have reservations for lunch. That is all. Dismissed!”

Everyone nodded and stood, but Seron spoke up.

“Jenny. Teach us to load and unload the film.”

* * *

To load the film, they had to turn a dial on the bottom of the camera and open the lid, then set the film cartridge on the left side.

Then they had to wind the end of the film around the take-up spool on the right side. Then, they had to close the lid. After taking two or three throwaway shots, they had to set the film counter under the dial to zero.

After taking 24 pictures, they had to press the button next to the shutter to unlock the camera. Then they had to turn the knob on the left until there was no more tension in the knob. Then they could take out the cartridge.

If they made a mistake somewhere in this process, they could end up with no photos at all or an entire roll of ruined photos. It required careful work.

After the explanation, the newspaper club set off.

They only took their wallets, cameras, lenses, and photometers. Each person took about five canisters of film. They also packed maps and water bottles in cloth bags or leather purses. The bicycle teams placed their belongings in the baskets at the front of their bikes.

As for the motorcycle team—

“It’s all on you, Lia.”

“Ugh.”

Natalia had to put two people’s worth of belongings into a backpack she would carry.

Outside the villa were four bicycles and a motorcycle.

The bicycles included cross-bikes and touring bicycles with straight handlebars and gears.

There were different types of frames as well. Jenny and Meg elected for types with lower frames so they could climb on and off easily, while Seron and Nick chose models with triangular frames.

And as the bicycle team adjusted their seats and checked their brakes—

“Whoa! This is the latest model!”

Larry ran his hands over the black motorcycle in awe.

The 250cc motorcycle had a four-stroke engine and a single engine cylinder, and had drum brakes for both the front and the back.

Just as Larry raved, it was a very recent model. There wasn’t a speck of dust on the glinting muffler, fenders, and rear suspension springs.

The oval fuel tank was also silver in color. The top was painted black, and there were thick rubber cushions over the tank where the knees went.

The motorcycle could seat two people. The second seat was on top of the rear fender behind the rider's seat.

Mr. Ruf had prepared and even serviced the bicycles and motorcycle the previous night. He turned to Larry. "You know how to ride it, yes?"

"My brother taught me, sir! This isn't something to brag about, but I've never incurred a traffic violation, either!" Larry replied.

"Take care of yourselves. Motorcycles are great, but it's very easy to get in an accident."

Then he handed Larry two leather jackets, two silver helmets, two black-framed goggles, and two pairs of gloves.

Larry put on his jacket, helmet, and gloves.

"Hm. This isn't working."

Natalia had pinned up her hair, which made it impossible for her to put on her helmet. She went all the way back to the bathroom to untie her hair and tie it in a ponytail. Then she tucked in her ponytail under her jacket and put on her helmet.

When Natalia hid her long hair and dressed like a motorcycle rider, she looked almost like a handsome young man.

"It is cool, Natalia! You look like a cool rider!" Meg cheered. Larry had to agree, but he pouted.

"Thanks, Megmica. —Why the long face, Larry? Want me to drive instead?"

"Pop quiz, Lia. Is the clutch on the left side or the right?" Larry asked, miming the act of clutching the handlebars.

"Hm. This?"

Natalia stepped down with her right foot.

"... Yeah, no."

Before departure, a small argument broke out between Jenny and Kurtz.

Kurtz and Litner told Jenny that they would follow her by car. Jenny refused, saying she had never needed such security detail at Ercho Village. But—

"Miss. If anything happens to you here, Litner and I will certainly lose our jobs. I have a three-year-old daughter. And Litner finally overcame the odds that come with this line of work and found herself a boyfriend." Kurtz argued solemnly, exposing personal details with a completely straight face.

Litner stood by him in mechanical silence all the while.

"Man, Mr. Kurtz is good. Guess you'd have to be, if you wanted to be Jenny's bodyguard."

"It is not good to leave them, Jenny. It would be too sad to lose their jobs," Meg said, taking Kurtz's side.

"Thank you, Miss Megmica." Kurtz nodded. "Now if you'll excuse us, Miss Jenny. We will proceed to follow you like a pair of stalkers."

Jenny was forced to give up.

"Fine. But you have to keep your distance, okay? Fifty meters."

Everyone was finally ready to go.

“Let’s all do our best until noon!” Larry cried.

“Yes!” “Yes!” “Yeah!”

Meg, Nick, and Natalia raised their fists into the air.

“Yeah.” Seron followed, half a beat behind.

Jenny was already on her bicycle.

“Now get out there and shoot! Shoot like your life depends on it! Pretend you’ve never heard of personality rights! And remember this. ‘One second after you press the shutter, the photograph might feel like a waste of film. But in one year, it’ll be a good memory. In ten, an irreplaceable treasure. And in a hundred, it’ll be a piece of history’.”

“Nice one, Jenny. —By the way, I have a question,” Larry said, raising a hand.

“Yeah?”

“Are we allowed to take photographs of one another?”

“I guess it’ll be practice for taking portrait shots. Don’t forget to adjust the focus.”

“Right. Hear that, guys? We now have permission to photograph cute girls. Don’t hold back.”

“Oh? Flattery will get you nowhere, Larry.”

“What’re you talking about, Lia? I’m taking photos of the motorcycle.”

“Honest, huh. I like that. As a reward, I will personally strangle you from behind while we’re on the motorcycle.”

“With a cause of death that stupid, we’ll make headlines in all of Roxche.”

Chapter 3: Lawrence

“All right, let’s go.”

“W-wait a moment, Jenny.”

Jenny and Nick were the first out the gates.

Jenny pedaled with surprising speed for her size, blasting off as though launched by a rocket. Nick followed, his long hair aflutter.

Kurtz and Litner followed by car. The car was originally a military-use vehicle, but had been converted for civilian use. They left the roof open so they could jump out at the first sign of trouble.

“I’m off.”

“You mean *we*. Now take us someplace nice, driver.”

Though Natalia was clinging to him from behind, Larry did not look happy in the least. Once the motorcycle was warmed up, he set off. He stopped at the gates and looked in both directions before turning.

There were two people left.

“Let’s get going.”

“Yes. Let’s go!”

Seron and Meg departed, seen off by the Ruf couple.

“Would you mind if we went to the right?”

“I will leave the road to you, Seron. It is not to brag about, but I learned the Roxchean phrase ‘bad with directions’ very early.”

They turned right.

Side-by-side they cycled down the empty road across the pastures.

In the Capital District, bicycles could not be ridden side-by-side on the roads. But there was no one to get mad at them here. Seron decided that he would move out of the way if a car came by, and rode on Meg’s left side on the right side of the road.

“It feels very good. It is the first time cycling since I came to Roxche. In elementary school I often went to play with my friends at their homes. It reminds me of that time.”

Seron’s pedaling grew stronger when he saw the smile on Meg’s face. Only when he came close to overtaking her did he slow down.

Some time passed.

“How should we do this?” Seron asked, still pedaling.

“Now that I think to it, you are right. We cannot be cycling for long. I would have taken photos of the villa from far, but I forgot to take photos.”

The villa was far behind them already.

“We can shoot the villa anytime. Let’s suggest things we want to take pictures of, then we’ll stop.”

“I understand. I will take photos of you later, Seron. Please take photos of me as well.”

“Y-yeah. Definitely.”

As Seron wondered how he would get his hands on photographs that were sure to become club property, the bicycles passed several manors.

And finally—

“Seron, that house is very beautiful. I want to take photographs of that house!”

About 10 meters ahead, on the right side of the gently-sloping hill, stood a home much smaller and cozier than the opulent villas they had passed.

“This looks like a house in a children’s novel. It is beautiful. Let’s hurry and shoot it.”

They stopped in front of the house. Meg quickly set up the kickstand and opened her bag, taking out her photometer and camera.

She did as Jenny taught, adjusting the exposure and looking through the viewfinder with her right eye.

She saw the gardens and their beautiful flowers, as well as the green gates.

Click. Meg snapped a photo.

As Seron waited, he glimpsed a figure moving in the garden. A man. He crossed the garden without so much as casting them a glance.

“I think there’s someone here, Megmica. We should ask permission first—then maybe we could even get some close-ups.”

“Ah, that is true. Is this way called ‘stalking’? Anyway, it is not good.”

Meg put away her camera without taking another photo.

“Good morning,” Seron called out.

“Yes? Who is it?”

A calm woman’s voice answered.

The owner of the voice soon came over to the gate from beside the flower beds.

The prim old woman had to have been over 80 years old. Her long white hair was tied neatly.

Seron bowed his head.

“Excuse us, ma’am. We’re secondary school students staying at a friend’s villa in the neighborhood. My name is Seron Maxwell, and this here is Strauski Megmica from Sou Be-Il. We’re classmates.”

The woman smiled kindly at Seron. “It’s a pleasure. I’m Hannah Lawrence. I’ve been living in this village for a very long time.”

Seron explained to Hannah that he and Meg were practicing with their cameras and asked if they could take photographs of her beautiful house and garden.

“By all means, do come in. I don’t mind at all.”

Seron and Meg parked their bicycles outside the gate.

“Thank you.” “Thank you, ma’am.”

Hannah held the green gate open for them. They stepped inside.

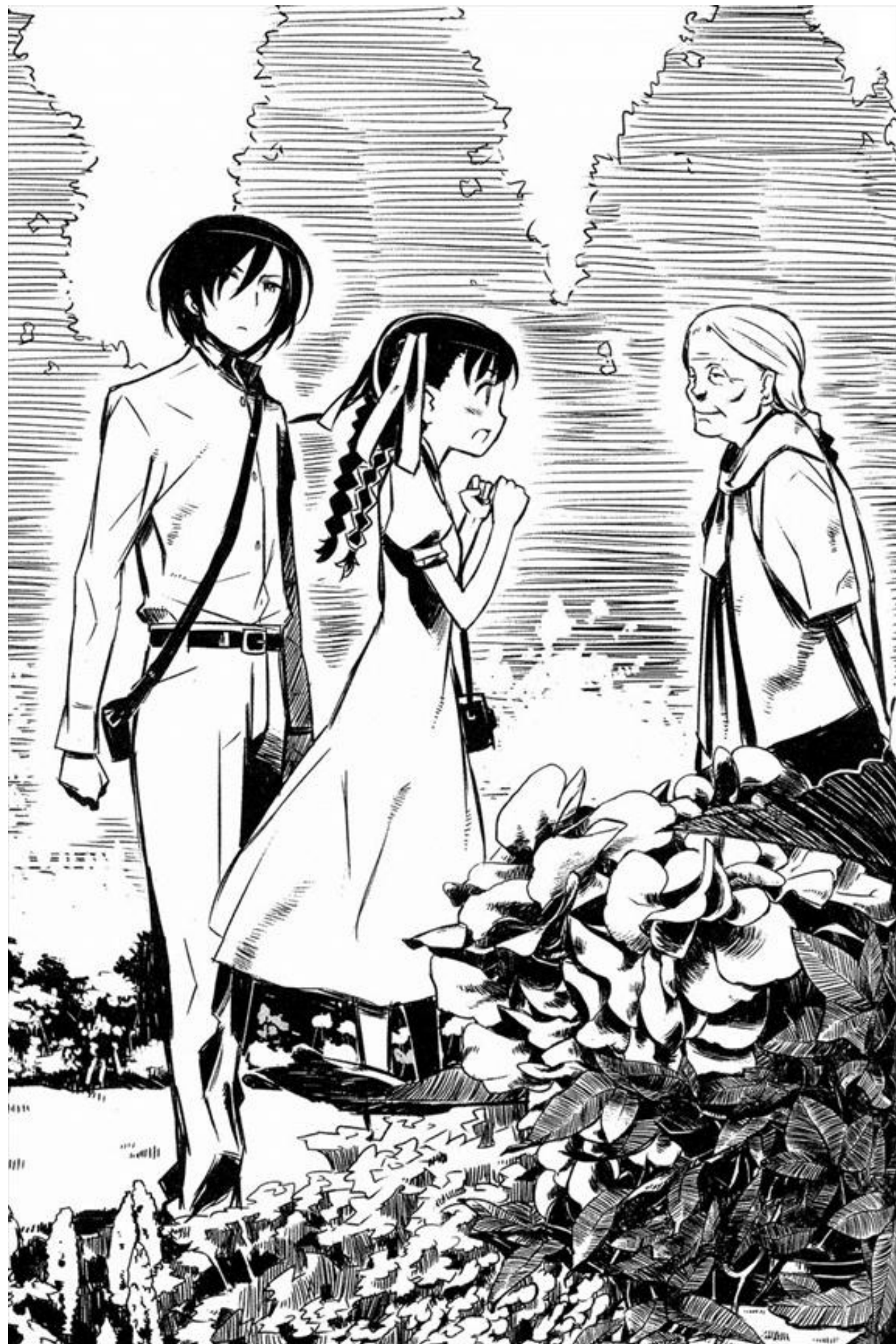
The garden was filled with more than enough flowers to match the garden at Jenny’s villa. There were purple gentianas, white gardenias, blue lavenders, and many others blooming in colorful harmony. The garden exuded a tranquil beauty.

“Wow. It is very beautiful.”

“My, my. Thank you very much. Your Roxchean is very good, Megmica.”

“Ah! Thank you very much, Mrs. Lawrence.”

Meg, Hannah, and Seron talked as they headed toward the center of the garden. There stood the man Seron had spotted earlier.



The man seemed to be in his fifties. He was balding, wore blue work overalls and was skinny in build. Nicely put, he seemed to be a pleasant man. Less so, he seemed frail.

"This here is Mr. Hampleton, my gardener. He works magic with the flowers here." Hannah introduced him to Meg and Seron. They greeted him.

When Hannah explained that she invited Meg and Seron because they wanted to take photos of the garden, Hampleton grinned.

"I'm flattered. I'll be inside polishing my tools," he said, and gathered all his tools on a hand cart before wheeling it away.

"Were you in the middle of something? We're sorry to interrupt," Seron apologized, but Hannah did not seem to mind.

Thanking her again, Meg and Seron began taking photos of the garden. They adjusted the exposure, the shutter speed, and the angle just as Jenny had taught them.

They photographed the flowers, the house, and both at the same time. Meg took to photography like fish to a water, taking many more photos than Seron did. Sometimes she shot Seron as well. But he did not take a single photograph of her.

"I shouldn't bother her when she's so busy taking her own photos. Yeah." Seron convinced himself.

About when Meg had exhausted an entire roll of film, Hannah returned to the garden.

"Megmica? Seron? Would you care for some tea?" she asked, carrying out a white teapot and three cups.

As Meg and Seron thanked her, Hannah led them to the garden table. They all took a seat.

Hannah served them rose hip tea from her own garden. A fragrant aroma permeated the air. Thanking her again, Seron and Meg sipped their tea. Hannah was happy to hear they liked it.

"Where are you coming from, then?" she asked.

"The capital, ma'am," Seron replied. In Roxchean, the word 'capital' referred to the Capital District, not the capital city of a member state. There was no need to add a descriptor.

"My goodness!" Hannah exclaimed. "I lived in the capital about 20 years ago because of my late husband's work. Such nostalgic times. Have you heard of Sears Patisserie on Ninth Street in the east? It has a very long history, you know."

Seron and Meg exchanged glances. Seron gestured, yielding the explanation to Meg. Meg smiled.

"Yes! We have! The son is our senior-classman at our school!"

"How lovely. Sears Patisserie always made the most scrumptious sachertorte."

"Yes! It is the best cake in all the world! It is true! It tastes most amazing on the side with whipped cream, with no sugar! It is the most delicious!"

"Absolutely. If a Westerner agrees with me, it must be true."

"Yes!"

Meg and Hannah launched into a discussion about cakes, completely ignoring Seron for some time.

Seron enjoyed his solitude, however, winding back his film and appreciating the voice of the girl he loved.

At the same time—

“Wonder what they’re doing right about now.”

“Huh? —Oh, Seron? Who knows.”

“Pessimistic of you.”

“It’s fine. He’s better off taking it slow with Megmica. If we rush him, he might die of shock.”

“I see. Anyway, can’t you go any faster? Or is this a silent jab at my weight?”

“Motorbikes are better off taking it slow too.”

“Whatever.”

The motorcycle continued its leisurely ride down the country road.

At the same time—

“You’ll get my shadow in the frame if you shoot from there! Did you set the focus? What about the exposure? Tuck in your arms! Don’t let the camera hang from your hands!”

“Please, Jenny. Are you channeling Ms. Krantz now?”

The last two members of the newspaper club were on the plains. Their subject: a lone sheep focused on its task of grazing.

And about 50 meters away—

“Just out of curiosity, how did you know about my boyfriend?”

“Logic and common sense. You’ve been dressing up after work hours lately. So I was right, eh? Congratulations.”

“... ”

“Hope this one lasts longer.”

“Please, I’ll sue you for harassment.”

The car carrying Kurtz and Litner and their friendly banter hummed quietly.

* * *

As they moved on to their second cup of tea, Meg and Hannah began to discuss flowers.

Hannah explained that, after losing her husband, she had begun to live a life of peaceful solitude in her gardens.

“It is a wonderful life! I, too, want to someday raise my garden like this. Now I live in an apartment building so I admire homes with gardens inside them. I want to try and live in a home like your house.”

He had a house like this one, Seron thought to himself, but he did not say anything.

“But I couldn’t have managed such a lovely garden on my own. Mr. Hampton is such a talented man.” Hannah said.

“The flowerpots at the gate and the walls are beautiful as well. I can see many flowers from the road, so I think they will make the eyes of people who go back and forward very happy.”

“Thank you, Megmica. But something has been troubling me recently.”

“Oh? What has been?”

“My flowerpots keep falling whenever cars pass by. At first I thought it was the wind, but...”

Hannah trailed off sadly. Seron finally broke his silence.

“Was someone tipping them over intentionally?”

“Yes. I think some of the village youths might be knocking them over with sticks for fun.”

“How mean! That is very bad! People who do not treat flowers as treasures are bad people!” Meg said indignantly, rising to her feet. Seron blanked out in surprise. Hannah smiled.

“Thank you, Megmica. Thank you for getting angry on my behalf.”

“Oh. I am sorry, Mrs. Lawrence. I was just very mad.”

Meg took a seat again. She took her teacup in both hands and drained it in one go.

“But it makes me so happy to meet such kind young people like you, Megmica.”

“Yes! And people who do bad things will have bad things happen to them returned. In Roxchean, they say ‘what goes around comes around’.”

Hannah chuckled. “Absolutely. Everyone must pay their dues in time.”

* * *

Meg and Seron enjoyed their tea break, but they could not linger too long. They finally left Hannah Lawrence’s home.

“Come back anytime,” Hannah said, seeing them off. Meg turned around several times as she pedaled away, waving back at Hannah.

Once Hannah’s house was out of sight—

“I believe wonderful meetings are in many different places. Meetings which are coincidence but wonderful,” Meg said.

Seron agreed, casting her a sidelong gaze.

Afterwards, Meg and Seron biked slowly around the village and took mostly landscape photos.

They spotted a holstein cow on the pasture. Meg looked at it through her viewfinder from across the road.

“Seron, please try to stand over there. I will take a photo together with the cow behind.”

“Right here?”

“Please more to the right side. Oh, I am sorry. To the right that I see. Yes! Please stop there. And will you hold up your left arm? Open your hand please.”

“Like this? Why?”

“Because it looks that you are holding back that cow with one hand! Please do not move from that.”

Though he guessed that Jenny might consider this a waste of film, Seron did exactly as Meg instructed.

Click.

Chapter 4: Neil

A little before lunch, when Seron's wristwatch was pointing to 11:41, Seron and Meg arrived at the center of town.

Several streets converged there, and large buildings stood around them. Huckanee Memorial Park was prominently visible in the center.

The grass was bright green, and the trees were lush with leaves. The fountain spewed water rhythmically.

Unusually enough, statues of sheep were arranged in a circle around the fountain. Children were clambering atop them.

"We shot many photographs, rode very much, and became very tired. And I am hungry."

"I'm looking forward to lunch."

Meg and Seron pushed their bicycles into the park.

A tiled pathway was paved down the grass, with benches lining the sides. The benches seated three and had intricately-carved armrests and backrests.

On one of them lounged Larry. He was looking up at the sky with his helmet and jacket beside him.

"You're early, Larry."

Larry slowly turned.

"Hey guys. You made it, huh..." he groaned wearily.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm never gonna ride with Lia again," Larry sighed.

"Oh my goodness. Has something happened to you?"

"We got pretty far thanks to the motorcycle, but every time we passed a store she'd wrap her arms around my gut like a constrictor so I would stop. She just kept eating and eating—cookies, ice cream, you name it. What in the world does her stomach look like? I almost felt sick watching her eat. Lia's an extraterrestrial, no two ways about it."

Seron and Meg exchanged glances. Meg burst out laughing.

Seron froze, like he'd been struck by lightning. Meg spoke in his place.

"And where now is the extraterrestrial?"

"Oh. Getting crêpes at the shop over there. I told her to save some space for lunch, but looks like she doesn't understand Roxchean anymore."

"Oh my goodness. How incredible."

Larry sighed. "I learned my lesson, so I guess it's okay. How'd it go for you guys? Take lots of photos?"

"Yes!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. About three rolls."

"Good to hear. By the way, did you see the police cars on your way here?"

"No." Seron shook his head. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah. I asked a policeman—"

"A fatal car crash?"

The restaurant they had reservations at was next to the village hall.

It was the biggest restaurant in town, packed with locals on their lunch break.

Seron and the others were seated at the table at the very end, which they had reserved in the morning. Kurtz and Litner sat with them this time, as cautious as ever.

There was nothing on the white tablecloth yet save for some cups and a bottle of water with a lemon slice floating inside.

“We didn’t pass by the scene, I’m afraid. What happened?” asked Nick. Larry gave him the same answer he had given Seron earlier.

“It’s a bit far from the villa, but apparently a small truck drove off the road last night, then back onto the road and into a tree.”

“How awful.”

“And?” Jenny urged Larry on.

“Both people in the truck died.”

“That’s what happens when you speed. Practice safe driving, everyone,” Natalia said nonchalantly. Larry ignored her, but she continued. “That accident must have been what we heard last night before we went to bed. You can hear better over long distances at night.”

The others recalled the previous night and nodded.

“Hm…”

Jenny mumbled to herself and looked around the restaurant. The adults were enjoying their lunches, not particularly disturbed.

“Not a lot of distress around here considering two people died,” she commented.

“Apparently the people who died were local kids,” Larry said, “They were teenagers. The policemen warned us about them just in case—a bunch of no-good kids’ve been lurking around for the past year and a half. You know how the Capital District has gangsters?”

“Yeah. But I’m surprised there are gangsters in a small village like this.”

“Obviously they’re not on the same scale. They’re really just a bunch of delinquents. They skip classes at vocational school or sneak around at night. There are four groups of them, and they’re fighting each other just like the gangs in the Capital District.”

“Fighting? Surely not to the point of starting knife fights or shootouts, like the gangs in the capital?” Nick asked with a smile. Larry shook his head.

“Nah. They get into brawls in the park, show off about being the strongest, or start races on their trucks. Nothing too big. There’s supposed to be about a dozen kids in each gang.”

“I see.”

“But it’s been a problem for the village since a lot of rich folks come to vacation here.”

Jenny looked bitter. “Tch. I leave the place for a couple years and everything turns into a mess.”

“But it’s got nothing to do with you, Jenny.”

“What was it like when you got there, Larry?”

“They were towing away the truck. It drove straight into this huge tree, and it looked like the driver’s seat was rolled around it or something. You could barely recognize it. What was it, ‘blunt force trauma’?”

It was awful, Natalia said. But neither she nor Larry looked particularly upset.

“Well, I learned that I’d never want to run into a tree. But there was something weird about the accident.”

“Like what?” Seron asked on everyone’s behalf.

“Thing is, the truck drove off the road pretty far from where the crash happened. Like 400 meters away,” Larry said, drawing a diagram on the table. With his left hand he drew a winding road, and with his right the truck.

The two hands veered apart for a time, then crossed.

“Then it went out of control and crashed into a tree, perpendicular to the road. But even if it’s a moonless night, don’t people usually notice something’s wrong the moment they go off the road?”

“True,” Jenny agreed.

Seron nodded. “Yeah.”

“But the truck just kept going down the field in a straight line. Then it swerved and crashed without even slowing down. I just don’t get it.”

“Perhaps the driver was aware that he’d gone off the road?” Nick suggested. “Perhaps he attempted to return, as though he were operating an all-wheel drive vehicle. But he mis-operated the steering wheel and drove into the tree.”

“I thought about that too. But then why would he have crashed perpendicular to the road?”

“True.” Seron nodded. “Even if he’d missed the tree, he would have just ended up crossing the road, not going back onto it. No one would do that unless they were trying to kill themselves. Larry, did the policemen tell you the cause of the accident, by any chance? I’m sure they must already know that the driver hadn’t slowed down.”

“Yeah. Driving under the influence and lack of sleep.”

“I see.”

“From what I could make out, the police were pretty set on it. Probably not planning on a serious investigation. They just wanted to clean up the place and end it quietly, I could read it on their faces,” Larry said. Then he crossed his arms and frowned. “But it just bugs me. Even if you were dead tired, you’d definitely wake up if you drove off the road. I’d almost wager the driver was dead before the crash. Although we’ll never know now.” He finished with a shrug.

“You took photos, right?” asked Jenny.

“Oh. I forgot.”

“Sit down for a sec, Larry.”

“I *am* sitting.”

Jenny took a deep breath to give Larry a scolding—

“Thank you for waiting!”

But she was cut off by the arrival of lunch.

A plump, middle-aged woman served their food.

“It looks very delicious!” Meg exclaimed hungrily. The menu today was spaghetti served on a massive plate.

“It sure is! Eat up, kids!”

There was a veritable mountain of spaghetti on the platter-sized plate. Flakes of onion and bell pepper were sprinkled around, while meatballs fried to a golden crisp dotted the plate conspicuously.

Jenny grinned. “What do you think? This is the local specialty meatball spaghetti. It’s village tradition to fight over it while you eat. Forget you ever learned table manners.”

When the others looked around, they saw the other patrons eating their spaghetti in groups.

The waitress placed silverware on one table after another, followed by the local cheese in brick-sized blocks, along with massive cheese graters.

“Cheese is optional. But you’re gonna have to shred it yourself—which isn’t gonna be easy, I promise,” Jenny explained.

“How much longer, chief?” Natalia asked, holding up her fork. There was a sniper’s glint in her eye.

“All right. Say your prayers and let’s eat. Go!”

And so began the six-way battle.

To no one’s surprise, the first targets were the meatballs. Forks were driven into them one after another, until there were none left to be hunted down.

“Watch it, Lia! you almost stabbed my hand!”

“Outta my way, shortie. I just might end up chowing down on you instead!”

“Nat, you will find yourself with the stomachache of a lifetime should you eat Larry raw. But don’t think we will be backing down so easily. —Why not join the battle, Seron?”

“I...I’m almost too scared to step in.”

“Natalia...it is very scary.”

“Hey, save some for your president!”

When the flames of war had died down, a clear winner emerged.

“Man, that was great!”

Natalia Steinbeck, who had devoured more spaghetti and meatballs than anyone else.

“You’re an extraterrestrial *and* a pig, Lia. Should’ve snapped some photos as evidence...”

* * *

After lunch, Seron, Larry, Nick and Natalia lazed around on park benches.

Their bicycles were parked along the pathway, and the motorcycle by the road about 10 meters away. A litter further away was the car where Kurtz and Litner were on standby.

Seron, Larry, Nick, and Natalia lounged peacefully on the bench in the afternoon sun.

Jenny and Meg had gone to a stationery store across the street.

“I’m stuffed...”

Natalia, the only girl who remained, brushed her ponytail over her shoulder and in front of her, looking up at the sky.

“Wow! It’s a brand-new motorbike!”

“Cool!”

“Whoa!”

A group of children began chattering. They were boys whose voices hadn’t yet changed. But—

“I wish I had one of these babies! It looks so slick!”

“Then just take it!”

“Yeah! No one’s watching!”

The content of their discussion was decidedly un-childlike. In fact, they were discussing a crime.

The newspaper club looked over at the source of the voices. Three boys between the ages of 10 and 12 were walking down the sidewalk.

From their overalls, comfy pants and checkered shirts, and their short, messy hair and sunburned skin, it was clear they were local children.

The boys did not realize that the newspaper club’s eyes were on them.

“With a motorbike, you just gotta cut the wire inside and you’re set to go.”

“Really? You’re so smart!”

“I bet it’d be real nice to go racing on this.”

Innocently and loudly the boys continued to plan their crime.

“Whatever shall we do, Larry? At the rate they’re planning, they’ll be riding down the street before you know it,” Nick joked.

Larry cringed and waved his hand.

Nick nodded. “Well, I suppose we can leave them be until they decide to take action. And I’m sure Mr. Kurtz and Ms. Litner will stop them if necessary.”

For some time the little delinquents discussed hotwiring, but they eventually stopped and continued down the street—there were simply too many people outside.

But a moment later—

Larry frowned.

The boys spotted Jenny and Meg stepping out of the stationery store and surrounded them.

“Tch. So now they’re going after older girls?” Natalia sighed. “Boys, go get ‘em.” She added haughtily.

“Man... Let’s go, Seron.”

“Yeah.”

Larry and Seron stood, walking over to the nonplussed Jenny and the confused Meg.

“You, Nick?” Natalia asked, crossing her legs.

“I’m afraid I am not suited hand-to-hand combat.”

“You said that before.”

“So I did.”

“That mean you turn badass when you’ve got a weapon?”

“Well, I suppose so.”

“What kind of weapon?”

“A bomb, perhaps.”

“Scary.”

Natalia ended the conversation and turned blankly.

She expected to see Larry and Seron holding the boys by the collar, giving them the scolding of a lifetime—

“Huh?”

But what she saw was the opposite.

Petite Jenny was the one holding a boy by the collar, shaking him hard enough to slam him against the pavement.

“Jenny! Enough!”

And Larry was the one desperately trying to stop her.

“Somebody who was there explain this to me,” Natalia ordered, still sitting on the bench. Before her stood five of her friends and one young boy.

The boy was part of the group they had earlier labeled ‘delinquents’. He wore shorts with suspenders and a short-sleeved checkered shirt. He had freckles and short brown hair, and seemed to be about 12 years old. He was about the same height as Jenny.

Jenny’s hands were still gripping his collar.

“No way...no...”

He stood there like an apprehended criminal, looking about ready to burst into tears.

“What’s there to explain?” Larry answered Natalia’s question. “By the time I got there, this kid became the victim, not Megmica and Jenny. The others ran off, but Jenny grabbed this one and wouldn’t let go. She can tell you the rest.”

Natalia nodded.

“It can’t be...you’re not Jenfie! Let go! Let me go!” the boy cried.

“I don’t think he’s gonna run, chief,” Natalia said, “Let go of him.”

“Hmph!” Jenny snorted, practically throwing the boy out of her grip. “You idiot!”

“Ow! ...What happened to you, Jenfie?!”

“Who cares? That’s got nothing to do with you, Neil. What happened to *you*?!”

Meg, Seron, Nick, and Larry stared as Jenny and the boy snarled at each other.

“Hey, little man,” Natalia said kindly.

“Wh-whaddaya want?” the boy turned.

“Neil! We’re *older* than you! Roxchean has polite language for a reason!” Jenny snapped.

“O-okay. Wh-what is it, glasses lady?”

“There’s a good boy. I’d prefer it if you called me the ‘pretty glasses lady’, but I’m a nice person. Do you want to try this again?”

“Get to the point, Lia.”

“All right. The name’s Natalia Steinbeck. Fifteen years old. How about you, little guy?” Natalia asked with a smile on her face.

“N-Neil. Neil Locksmith. I’m 11 this year... I’ll be 12 soon,” Neil replied.

“All right. I’m a school friend of that scary redhead over there. Do you know her, Neil?”

“Yeah, but no!”

Meg tilted her head. “Pardon?”

“What’s that mean?” asked Natalia.

“Jenfie’s supposed to have long hair! And she’s quiet and cute and nice, just like a princess! Jenfie’s not s’pposed to look like a boy and act all mean! This isn’t Jenfie! It’s an impostor! It’s gotta be an extraterrestrial pretending to be her!” Neil raved, panicking. Larry put a hand on his shoulder.

“Calm down, Neil. Look. My name’s Larry Hepburn. Nice to meet you.”

“H-hello...”

“By ‘Jenfie’, you mean Jenny, right? Jenny Jones?”

“...Yes.”

“It’s okay. Jenny hasn’t been replaced by extraterrestrials. If anyone, it’s probably our pretty glasses lady who’s been abducted.”

“Shaddap,” Natalia said. Then she looked at Jenny. “Nice nickname.”

Jenfie—Jenny—frowned.

“It’s from a long time ago.”

“How do you know Neil?”

“...His dad works as a gardener in town. His dad and all his relatives are really good, so a lot of villa owners hire them. The Rufs, too. Neil came over to our villa a lot with his dad. Although that was two years ago.”

“I see. And you had long hair back then, Jenny?”

“Back then, yeah,” Jenny admitted, and grabbed Neil’s head again before twisting him around like a bottle cap.

Neil stared, wide-eyed. Jenny glared.

“What’s happened to you, Neil?! Last time I was here, you were such a bright kid! You said you were gonna be a great gardener like your dad! You were always helping him out when you didn’t have school! Now you’re just a delinquent-in-training! People are free to choose their careers, but delinquency isn’t a career!”

Neil could not make a comeback.

“It certainly doesn’t lead to many job opportunities.” Nick nodded. “But what is youth but a time to experience many things, Jenny? I’m sure your meeting here today will guide him back in the right direction.”

“That’s it, then,” Natalia said. “Let the poor kid go, chief. I think he’s had enough.”

Jenny did as she was told. “Go on home, okay? Don’t slack off just because it’s summer! And stop acting like an idiot! It’s not like you.”

“Okay...” Neil replied, hanging his head.

“Hold on, Neil. I want to ask you something.” Seron broke his silence just as Neil began walking away.

The others turned. All eyes were on Seron.

“Wh-what is it? Er...”

“It’s Seron Maxwell. Nice to meet you.”

“‘Maxwell’, like the frozen food?”

“My mother’s the president. Do you like our products?”

“Y-yeah... a whole lot. My favorite’s the cream stew and the hamburg steak.”

“Glad to hear it. —I just wanted to ask you about the fatal car accident last night.”

The newspaper club clearly saw Neil grimace. Seron cut to the chase.

“Did you know them?”

Neil nodded.

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that. If it’s okay with you, could you tell us what kind of people they were?”

“What kind of— well, they were just...just older boys. Just some bad guys with some kids working for them...”

Neil was obviously trying to hide something. Jenny frowned, but she did not interrupt Seron.

“I’ve heard that there are four gangs in this village. And these people were in one of them, right?”

“...Yeah. ‘Wolves’, ‘Jackals’, ‘Hunters’, and ‘Government’. The guys who died were Hunters.”

Larry furrowed his brow. “The first three aside, why ‘Government’?”

“Perhaps they wanted a name which sounded powerful. ‘We are the Government!’, they could boast,” Nick whispered.

Seron continued his line of questioning.

“So I suppose the other Hunters must be mourning their friends now.”

“I guess so...”

“You’re not in any of the groups yet, right Neil?”

“No. Not yet. If you want in, you gotta do something—anything—that’s real bad. Then everyone’s gonna accept you into the club. Like pickpocketing...”

“That’s theft! And it’s a crime! Don’t do it, Neil!” Jenny warned viciously.

“Since you’re not in any of them, you must be able to talk with boys from all of the gangs, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

Larry nodded in understanding. Seron continued.

“Just out of curiosity, was there anyone in one of the gangs who wanted to kill a rival gang member?”

Seron sounded as nonchalant as if he were asking Neil for his blood type. Neil paused, mouth agape. Then—

“N-n-n-n-no! None of ‘em are *that* bad! They’re bad guys, but they’re not evil! You’d get arrested for killing someone! You’d get executed! You’d go to hell!” Neil cried, waving his hands.

Seron thought for a moment.

“He’s right, Seron,” Natalia chimed in. “Isn’t murder too much for these guys?”

“You’re right,” Seron agreed. “Thank you, Neil. That’s all I wanted to ask.”

“Huh? Er...” Neil hesitated, wondering if he was free to go. “Then I’m going...”

As he turned to leave, Jenny howled behind him, “Don’t join any of them, you hear me?!”

Neil flinched and ran off.



* * *

The newspaper club followed Jenny's schedule and left their film to be developed and printed at a photography studio.

The manager was happy to get so much business, and promised to deliver the printed photos the next afternoon. The newspaper club headed back to the villa.

Larry and Natalia set out first on the motorcycle. The others followed on their bicycles. And about 50 meters behind them followed Kurtz and Litner in their car.

Along the way, Nick asked Jenny a question.

"It was quite the surprise to hear you once had long hair, Jenny. Do you have any photos from the time?"

"Eh. Who cares what kind of hairstyle I used to have?"

Meg chimed in. "I am very sure that it would have looked good on you. Now is good as well, however."

"Thanks," Jenny said. "But I prefer my current hairstyle."

"Sure. I mean, I used to have a buzz cut in primary school," Seron added.

"You have any photos?"

The four members took their time heading back to the villa. By the time they arrived, Larry was happily polishing the motorcycle.

It was two in the afternoon.

"It's nap time, guys," Jenny said, "Meet back at five to help Mr. and Mrs. Ruf with the barbecue. Dismissed."

Chapter 5: The Murder

An entire morning of exercise, a delicious meal, and a breezy afternoon.

All the pieces for a good afternoon nap were in place. Seron and four of the others returned to their own rooms and slept until just before five.

“Get up, guys! It’s ten to five! Up! Up! We don’t have a bugle so I’m shouting until you get up! Get up! Get up!”

Larry’s voice resounded from the gardens, waking Seron.

Rubbing his eyes, Seron went to the balcony. He saw Larry in the garden in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, wiping down the motorcycle with a pail of water beside him.

“Hey, buddy! Sleep well?”

“Yeah. Are you still cleaning the motorcycle? You’ll start eroding it if you’re not careful.”

“Nah, I took her for a spin while you guys were asleep. I just got back a little while ago. It was nice and smooth without that extra weight on my back.”

“Well, sorry for being so big and heavy,” Natalia said sarcastically from overhead.

The barbecue preparations began on schedule, with the newspaper club helping out.

Everyone changed into their gym uniforms because their clothes might get dirty and smelly. Natalia had done up her hair.

Mr. and Mrs. Ruf had gotten all the meat and vegetables. All that was left to do was prepare the ingredients and start cooking.

“Looks like we’re up, girls.”

“Yes, it does.”

“I guess it’s nice to help out sometimes.”

Natalia, Meg, and Jenny helped out at the island counter in the large kitchen, washing, chopping, and skewering vegetables and grinding apples for the barbecue sauce.

But—

“Er...how am I supposed to cut this thing?” Jenny wondered.

“Don’t sweat the details, chief. If they don’t like it, they won’t eat it,” Natalia said.

“Hmm... I will make my left hand into the cat’s paw...” Meg struggled with the knife.

The girls weren’t particularly skilled in the kitchen. Mrs. Ruf had to guide them through every process, correct their mistakes, and fret over their misadventures.

Meanwhile,

“Could you get the other end, Seron?”

“Right.”

“I shall bring the charcoal, then.”

Larry, Seron, and Nick were moving the cylindrical barbecue grill onto the stone patio in the garden.

The grill was large, sturdy, and heavy with metal legs. The boys placed it in a wide-open area, and also arranged the charcoal box, the chairs, and tables.

Larry put charcoal into the grill. Then he crumpled up several newspaper pages and put them under the tray, and pressed the ignition. The newspaper caught fire, and soon the charcoal was heated.

The rest would not be difficult. Seron and Larry headed to the kitchen and let Nick take over.

Preparations were still underway in the kitchen, but Mrs. Ruf was the only one who seemed to know what she was doing.

“This is why I hate onions,” Jenny sniffled. “Although I like eating them.”

“Here, let me help,” Seron said. He washed his hands and put on an apron.

“Looks good on you,” Natalia chuckled, skewering the beef.

“It very much suits you.” Meg cheered, skewering the vegetables.

Seron let himself be heavily distracted by the sight of Meg in an apron, and glanced at a bowl filled with uncooked vegetables and ice water.

“These onions are for the salad, correct? Should I julienne them and place them in the water?”

“That would be perfect. Just three more, please,” Mrs. Ruf replied. Seron picked up a peeled onion.

First, he cut off the top and the root and chopped the onion vertically in half. Then he placed one half flat against the cutting board and curled his left hand together like a cat’s paw—

Chopchopchopchopchopchopchopchopchopchopchop

Rhythmically and mechanically, almost fast enough to leave behind afterimages of the knife, Seron julienned the onion into equal-sized slices. About halfway through he turned the onion around and started from the other side.

One onion, then two, then three later—

Completely oblivious to the bewildered stares of the newspaper club girls, Seron put the julienned onions into the bowl of ice water.

“I’m finished. Is there anything else I could help with?”

The moment he put down his knife—

“What the heck *are* you?!” “It is amazing, Seron!” “Marry me right now!”

Three sets of voices cried out in unison, making it difficult to tell what they were saying.

“Hey, one at a time! And FYI, Seron’s a really good cook,” Larry said.

Seron stood frozen, overwhelmed by Meg’s compliment.

* * *

It was finally dinnertime.

The sun was still above the horizon, tinting the sky a light orange. Everyone was gathered around the garden table.

When Larry put on an apron over his gym uniform, Natalia was quick to comment, “That looks heinous!”

“Hey, you didn’t say that about Seron!”

“Don’t put yourself on his level.”

“Dammit, Lia...you’re getting all the burnt pieces.”

Larry expertly grilled the beef skewers. He cooked them until they were heated through and through, then sprinkled salt and pepper on them.

"This is really good," Seron said.

"It's really quite delightful." "It is very delicious," Nick and Meg agreed.

When Jenny took her first bite, she grimaced. Natalia noticed in the midst of downing skewer after skewer.

"What's up, chief? Something stink?"

"No...the opposite. I don't believe it...this is perfectly cooked and salted!"

"Tell him yourself."

"Tch. Hey, Larry! Gimme another one!"

"Okay! And have some veggies, too! Seriously!"

Meanwhile, Mr. Ruf, Kurtz, and Litner—

"Would the two of you care for something to drink? We have some excellent wine in the cellar if you'd like."

"Not while we're on duty, thank you." "Not on the job, thank you."

"I see. That's too bad."

They drank coffee instead of wine.

The frenzy that was dinner was coming to a close. Everyone was starting on dessert—Mrs. Ruf's homemade vanilla ice cream—when Natalia asked an unexpected question.

"Mrs. Ruf, did Jenny have long hair before?"

"Hey, that's ancient history!" Jenny snapped, but Natalia continued.

"Do you have any photographs from then? I'm actually studying to be a hair stylist."

"You liar!"

"Aww, be a sport, chief. Mrs. Ruf?"

"Of course. Just one moment," Mrs. Ruf replied, getting to her feet.

"No! It's okay, Auntie! You don't have to show them!"

"But you were the most adorable little girl, Miss Jenny. That photo is my treasure. There's no harm in showing your friends."

Quickly, Mrs. Ruf disappeared inside.

"Tch." Jenny pouted.

"I am a little in anticipation."

"Indeed. I may as well use it as a reference for my own hair."

Soon, Mrs. Ruf returned—to the excitement of Meg and Nick, and the indifference of Seron and Larry. In her hand was a wooden picture frame.

When she placed the frame on the table, the newspaper club—sans Jenny—huddled around.

In the frame was a color photograph featuring three subjects. The two adults on either side were Mr. and Mrs. Ruf, looking the same as they did now. From their thick sweaters it was apparent that the photo was not from the summer.

And standing between them was a skinny girl—

"Wait...this is *you*, chief?" Natalia gaped, looking back and forth from the photo to Jenny, who was wolfing down her ice cream.



“Yes.” Mrs. Ruf nodded. “This is from three years ago, when Miss Jenny was 12 years old. This is the only photo we have of her from then. I wouldn’t exchange this photograph for the world.”

Natalia stared again. “No way...you’re *adorable*.”

In the middle of the photo stood a small rich girl.

A brown duffle coat was wrapped around her skinny frame, and her waist-length red hair was decorated with ribbons. A bright smile adorned her face.

“Y-you were cute! You were like a doll, Jenny!” “My goodness...what a shock,” Meg and Nick commented.

“Yeah. It definitely is.” Seron nodded. For a time, everyone was silent.

Jenny, swallowing a heaping spoonful of ice cream, turned to Larry—who had not yet said a word.

“If you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

Larry’s blue eyes went back and forth from the present-day Jenny to the 12-year-old Jenny.

“Jenny...this is—”

“Yeah?”

“—this photo—”

“What about it?”

“Now *this* is what I call news photography!” he laughed. Jenny shot him a scathing look.

“If I ever become president of Roxche, I’m going to have you executed!”

* * *

Everyone had finished their ice cream and the warm tea that was served right afterwards. The sky was still ablaze with the light of dusk, but it was already almost eight in the evening.

The newspaper club and Mr. and Mrs. Ruf began to clean up, putting away the leftovers and used utensils.

“Can we skip the lecture tonight, chief? I’m getting drowsy,” Natalia said.

“All right,” Jenny replied. “You can go after we finish cleaning up. We’ll start again tomorrow—”

“Quiet!” Kurtz hissed out of the blue, cutting her off.

The newspaper club and the Ruf couple turned, surprised. Kurtz’s gaze was fixed on the door as he stood with his back to the others.

Several seconds passed in silence. Litner went up to him.

“What’s going on?”

“I heard a suspicious voice outside. Something like a moan. Stay here.”

“Right.”

Kurtz crossed the garden alone and headed for the gates.

“What’s happening?” asked Jenny. Litner repeated what Kurtz had said and turned to the Ruf couple.

“Was anyone scheduled to visit today?”

“No. But I assume it must have been a local drunk, or an escaped animal. It happens sometimes around here,” Mr. Ruf said, staying calm out of consideration for the students.

But then came Kurtz’s voice—

“Call an ambulance now! And the police!”

Larry and Litner were the first to react.

“Let’s go, Seron!” Larry cried. “You stay with the others, Nick!”

“Miss Jenny!” Litner said, stepping forward. “Everyone, let’s get inside!”

Seron put down the plates he was stacking and quickly went after Larry. Litner gently pushed the girls into the villa.

Being a fast runner, Larry made it to the front gates first.

“Mr. Kurtz! What’s going on?”

Seron arrived several seconds later.

Kurtz was squatting outside the slightly-ajar gate, right at the boundary between the road and the villa premises.

“This,” he replied tersely, looking at Larry and Seron.

Before Kurtz, across the pavement and the dirt, lay a person.

“Whoa!” “Ah!”

Larry and Seron cried out in unison.

The person was a young man, likely in his late teens. He was dressed similarly to the other locals—a pair of jeans and a checkered shirt.

He was covered in blood.

Kurtz rose to his feet and cast a watchful look over the area.

At the same time, he unbuttoned his suit so he could easily reach his belt, where he concealed a holstered gun.

He finished scanning the area and made sure that no one was around. Then he looked back at the boy on the ground.

“Wh-what happened here? What’s going on, Mr. Kurtz?” Larry asked again.

“I’m not sure. He was lying here when I arrived. I didn’t see anyone else.”

“Is he still breathing?” asked Seron.

Kurtz squatted again and placed his index finger on the boy’s neck, then over his mouth.

“Yes, but...” he trailed off gravely.

The boy’s breathing was so shallow it was hard to tell by sight if he was still alive. His eyes were closed, his face was deathly pale, and his head was completely unscathed—but his shirt and pants were soaked in blood. Blood was pooling on the pavement. The air reeked.

“Hey! Hey! Can you hear me?” Kurtz yelled into the boy’s ear. The boy trembled slightly, looking almost like a corpse.

“—s-stabbed...it hurts...”

“Who did this to you?”

“Don’t know...behind...”

The boy had barely enough strength to continue.

“Get a hold of yourself, young man! There’s a doctor on the way!” Kurtz said, then looked at Larry and Seron.

Then he shook his head. Larry and Seron quickly understood that the boy was beyond saving.

That was when Seron suddenly spoke.

“Hey, which group are you in?! Wolves? Jackals? Hunters? Government?”

Kurtz gave Seron a quizzical look. Larry understood what Seron was getting at.

“W-wolves...help me...don’t wanna die...”

Those were the boy’s last words.

Kurtz pulled open the boy’s shirt as he went silent.

There were multiple stab wounds all over his torso. His bleeding had almost stopped. Kurtz sighed.

Instead of attempting CPR, he checked the boy’s pulse and opened one of his eyes to check his pupils.

“He’s gone,” he finally said.

“Man...I’d heard about it, but it really does feel awful watching someone die right in front of you,” Larry said stiffly.

“I was hoping I’d never have to see someone die. I wish we could have saved him,” Seron admitted. He closed his eyes.

“Yeah. But it’s too late now. The dead can’t come back to life,” Larry said, observing a brief moment of silence. Then he looked up. “Seron, look at the road.”

“Huh? —Oh.”

There was a trail of blood left on the pavement. It started at the front gates and went east, disappearing into the distance.

“Strange. Why didn’t the killer finish him off on the spot, if he had time to inflict so many wounds?” Seron wondered.

Kurtz turned. “I’m going to have to ask you to get inside. We’ll have to shut the gates. Could you tell Litner and Mr. Ruf what happened here? We won’t be needing a doctor. Please have them call the police immediately.”

“Right. We’ll leave this to you, Mr. Kurtz,” Larry replied, taking Seron back through the front gates. After closing the gates behind them, they ran for the villa.

“This isn’t good. What’ll we tell the others?” Larry asked as they ran.

Seron replied, “Everything. But we shouldn’t show them.”

“Yeah.”

When they returned to the villa, Seron and Larry found everyone gathered in the entrance hall. Natalia and Meg were sitting on the sofa.

“What happened out there? Explain!” Jenny demanded, but Seron went instead to Litner and Mr. Ruf to quietly explain the situation. Mr. Ruf ran to the telephone again.

Only then did Seron turn to the rest of the newspaper club.

“Someone died just outside the gates.”

“What?” “Pardon me?” “Why?” “Huh?”

“He was probably a local teenager. I think he was stabbed multiple times someplace else before he managed to walk all the way here. Just before he died, he said he was one of the Wolves.”

Jenny understood the situation the moment Seron mentioned the delinquent group.

“Ugh. I see. So it happened again.”

“Wh-wh-what does its happening mean, Jenny?” Meg asked, trembling. Seron was the one who replied.

“It means Larry was right again. Yesterday’s car accident wasn’t an accident—this is a serial murder case.”

* * *

The sun finally set, and the orange sky quickly turned a light shade of blue. The police arrived just as darkness began setting on the grounds.

Three patrol cars with sirens and headlights ablaze, and one ambulance.

Larry and Seron saw the sirens stop in front of the villa.

“Let’s check it out.” “Yeah.”

“I’m coming too. I have to cover this story,” Jenny said, but—

“You should stay here, Jenny.” “Stay here.” “Please stay here, Miss Jenny.”

Seron, Larry, and Litner made no exceptions.

Natalia and Meg were still sitting side-by-side on the sofa. Natalia piped up.

“You wanna take pictures of a corpse, chief? Never took you for the type.”

“This is for *journalism*! There’s never been a murder at Ercho Village before!”

“But wouldn’t things blow up too much if you posted a piece about this on the campus walls? For get it. ‘Sides, Mr. Kurtz and Ms. Litner would never let you.”

“...All right. Fine.”

Extremely conscious of Litner’s gaze on her back, Jenny waved her hands and gave in.

Larry and Seron headed outside.

Kurtz was still at the gates. The police stood around the body—six uniformed officers and one portly middle-aged man in a brown suit.

The uniformed men were searching the vicinity of the corpse with powerful flashlights in hand. One of them was giving constant reports to someone over the radio.

The middle-aged man, who was speaking to Kurtz, noticed Larry and Seron. “Hm?”

“They heard the boy’s last words as well,” Kurtz explained. Larry and Seron went up to the man. Kurtz introduced them to him.

“This is Detective Hadley from the Ercho Village police station. Detective, this is Larry Hepburn and Seron Maxwell. They are classmates of my principal.”

Hadley, Seron, and Larry exchanged brief greetings.

Hadley was pudgy and balding. He had a round face and carried himself good-naturedly, repeatedly and constantly bowing his head apologetically.

“I’m terribly sorry this had to happen on your vacation, young sirs. It’s such a relief you weren’t hurt. Such a relief. Please don’t think too badly of our village for this,” he said without even being prompted.

He was not even trying to conceal his obsequious attitude. Larry cringed.

“More importantly, Detective. We have something to tell you.”

“Yes, young sir?”

“Just before he passed away, the boy said he was one of the Wolves.”

“I suppose it’s not surprising. A delinquent group, eh? I suspected as much the moment I saw the body. Any information you could provide would be a great help, young sir,” Hadley said, glancing at the body.

Larry looked at the body as well. A young police officer placed pieces of numbered paper on the body and took photos. Larry’s eyes narrowed slightly each time the flash went off.

Seron asked, “Do you know about last night’s car accident as well, Detective Hadley?”

“Hm? Ah, yes. Of course. Such an unusual accident. We don’t get many of those around here.”

“I heard the two victims were from the Hunters.”

“Hm? Indeed they were. You’re quite well informed, young sir.”

“That makes three delinquent deaths over the course of two days. Could it really be a coincidence?”

“Wh-what might you be suggesting?” Hadley asked, furrowing his brow. Seron went straight to the point.

“Don’t you think there’s a possibility that last night’s accident was actually a murder as well?”

Hadley fell silent. The flash went off again, casting light on his troubled face.

Finally, he scratched the back of his head.

“Hm...I wonder. Then I suppose this would be a serial murder case. That would be most unfortunate. What to do...?”

Clearly he had absolutely no confidence.

“I’m not certain how, but last night’s victims were murdered. And perhaps a member of the Hunters came to that same conclusion and attacked this person in retaliation,” Seron hypothesized.

“Hmm...I suppose that is a possibility, but I wonder...” Hadley trailed off. “I do suppose we’ll take that into account, young sir. Thank you for your assistance, and I apologize again for this horrid inconvenience. If you would convey my apologies to those inside as well.”

“Of course,” Seron replied. “I hope you’ll find the culprit soon.”

“We will do our utmost to bring him to justice. For this boy’s sake, if nothing else.”

Seron nodded and turned, gesturing to Larry.

But Seron suddenly stopped and turned back. He asked Hadley matter-of-factly, “Are you the one in charge of the investigation, Detective Hadley? If anything happens, should we come to you?”

Hadley nodded firmly. “Yes. I am the one in charge of this case, so please contact me if anything happens.”

“Let’s go back, Larry.”

“Yeah.”

Once again, Seron and Larry stepped back inside where Litner and the others were waiting. Jenny immediately demanded an explanation.

“Talk.”

Seron gave her a full and detailed explanation.

“Right. I think I get all that,” Jenny said.

“Did the detective have to be such a suck-up, though?” Natalia wondered.

Nick replied, “No one would be happy to have a murder take place in the town where their villa is, Nat. Especially the rich and powerful.”

“It must be unhappy.” Meg nodded. “I understand their feelings.”

“Yeah. Sheesh,” Jenny agreed.

“I wonder if the detective’s gonna get anything done,” Larry remarked, frowning his brow. But Seron shook his head.

“He might not look it, but Detective Hadley’s surprisingly clever.”

“Why d’you think that?” asked Larry. All eyes were on Seron.

“At the end, he said that he was the one in charge of this case, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That means that he must be from the homicide division.”

“Makes sense.”

At that point, Jenny and Litner understood.

“I get it...” “I see.”

Seron continued. “There wouldn’t be a homicide division at the local station of a town that’s never had a murder case before.”

“You’re right...”

“But Detective Hadley rushed over as soon as we reported this case. That must mean—”

“I get it! He must have been called last night from the nearest police station that had a homicide division! He was lying through his teeth the whole time!” Larry exclaimed both angrily and excitedly.

Natalia and the others finally nodded as well.

“Then they will question this case,” Meg said. Seron nodded.

“Yeah. The police don’t see last night’s crash as a simple accident, either.”

“Then what about the officer who talked to me today?” Larry wondered.

“He was either lying, or giving a subjective opinion. In any case, we know the police are on last night’s case too. Officially they’re pushing the accident angle, since it doesn’t cause as much panic as a murder.”

“I see. So they’re trying to save face for the village. If nothing else, it makes me feel better to know that they’re investigating.”

“But what bothers me is the direction they might take the investigation in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who do you think the police will suspect first?”

Nick was the one to respond. “Clearly, the members of the rival gangs.”

“Exactly. But from what we heard from Neil, the gangs don’t seem like they’d go that far. Even now I’m not convinced they’re involved except as victims.”

Nick agreed. “The gangs in the Capital District could be capable, perhaps, but...”

“Yeah...and these guys aren’t even real gangs,” Jenny agreed. “The kids here are just plain old delinquents. It doesn’t exclude them completely, but it’s not likely.”

“Yeah. The possibility isn’t zero, but it still bothers me what might happen. I hope the police don’t take this in the wrong direction...”

The conversation ended on a heavy note. No one had anything to say. That was when Mrs. Ruf returned.

“Everyone, let’s leave the rest to Mr. Kurtz and get some rest. I’ll finish cleaning up. And don’t worry; we’ll keep this villa safe.”

“I’ll keep watch overnight tonight,” Litner said.

The adults’ words were final; there was nothing left to say. The newspaper club prepared to return to their rooms.

“Er...Natalia?” Meg said tentatively.

“Hm?”

“May I sleep in your room for tonight?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Thank you. For some reason I am feeling scary.”

“No worries. If you’re really freaked out, why don’t we get one of our big strong men to sleep over too?” Natalia joked with a straight face.

“I’m saving myself for marriage, I’m afraid,” Nick replied first.

“No,” Larry declared, unamused. Natalia turned her sights on him.

“You too, Larry? Aww...we used to sleep in the same bed all the time when we were little. Still remember how adorable you were when you said stuff like ‘I’m cold, Lia. Stop pulling on my blanket’—”

“Somebody punch that memory out of me right now.”

“You’re no fun, Larry. And you, Seron? What do you say?” Natalia turned to Seron. He was frozen.

“Huh? Wha? Hm? Wait? What? I—”

He was on the verge of a total breakdown. Larry came to the rescue.

“Whoa! Still focused on the case, buddy? Once you get your thoughts rolling, you can’t hear anything people say, huh. That’s enough. Let’s all get to bed.”

Meg and Natalia went to Natalia’s room, and everyone else went to their own rooms and made sure to lock their doors and windows.

Meanwhile in the Capital District, a woman was taking a phone call.

“Confederation Police. Yes? Oh...yes? Er...what do you mean by that? ...Yes. Yes. ... Yes. W-wait! How did you—”

The woman in black Confederation Police uniform looked down at the notes she had scrawled during the second half of the conversation. She was in disbelief.

She picked up the receiver she had hung up, and made an internal call.

<This is Hartnett.>

“You wouldn’t believe the tip we just got.”

Chapter 6: The Investigation

The 3rd day of the eighth month.

Seron opened his eyes at the same time as usual.

The weather was just as great as it had been the previous day. It was a lovely morning.

Seron immediately stepped out onto the balcony.

There was no one in the garden.

All he saw were the flowers in bloom.

Seron got ready and went downstairs.

“Ah, you’re up early.”

There he was greeted by Mr. Ruf.

Mr. Ruf was sitting in a chair, his expression stiff. There was a blanket over his lap and a shotgun next to him.

“Good morning, Mr. Ruf. Thank you for everything. I slept very well last night.”

“Thank you for being so kind, Seron. And you’re very welcome. Mr. Kurtz is keeping an eye on the back garden, and Ms. Litner was ordered to get some rest earlier in the morning.”

“What about the police?”

“They finished their on-site investigation, cleaned up the road, and took the body away.”

“Did they find out anything else?”

“Apparently the boy was actually stabbed quite a ways away. The killer stabbed him, then hauled him over by car and dropped him by the road nearby. Who would do something so awful to someone so young? I don’t know the family in person, but apparently the boy’s father has a farm out west. They say the boy was always a delinquent, which is why he must have been walking around alone after dark.”

“What about reporters?”

“The police ‘misreported’ the location of the discovery. Some local reporters went over about 200 meters east down the road to get some photographs.”

“I see. I suppose ‘misinformation’ has its uses sometimes,” Seron said sarcastically. Mr. Ruf agreed.

“Are you feeling all right, Seron? It must have been a rude shock for you, when you’re supposed to be here on vacation. Perhaps we could speak to Miss Jenny and find you all different lodgings.”

Seron thought for a moment. “Jenny is the president, so I’ll leave it to her.”

“Of course. But I wager she’ll refuse to leave.”

“I agree.”

“Ha ha ha! So you knew.”

“Mr. Ruf. I want to ask you something. I just need your opinion, without taking anything else into account.”

“Of course.”

“Do the local delinquents seem like the type to commit murder?”

“No. Not at all.”

* * *

By breakfast time, the five remaining members emerged and sat down in the dining room to sate their hunger.

They were all dressed similarly to the previous day save for Meg, who was wearing long pants and a jacket.

Surprisingly, everyone said that they had gotten a good night's sleep.

"Looks like Mr. Kurtz and Ms. Litner will be happy," Larry remarked.

They said their prayers and dug in.

At first, the newspaper club ate in silence. But there was no avoiding the elephant in the room. Larry spoke first.

"I tuned in to the news in my room this morning. Confederation Radio didn't say a thing about the case."

"I highly doubt a small incident in a countryside town will make the national news," Nick said. "And the case two days ago, naturally, is being kept under wraps."

"Jenny, I wanted to discuss something with you," Seron said. He asked Jenny about finding different lodgings as Mr. Ruf had suggested, but Jenny did not think twice about replying,

"No."

Seron had expected that answer.

"Why do *we* have to move for some serial killer?"

"It's seriously a bother," Natalia nodded.

"But if one in ten thousand, a bad thing were really to happen..." Meg trailed off nervously.

"We can't set aside the possibility," Seron said.

"Pardon?" Meg replied in distress, but Seron continued.

"Let's suppose there really is a serial killer going after the local delinquents. Then he's bound to strike again soon. I'm sure he will."

Jenny agreed. "And if the police keep suspecting the delinquents, they won't even look for the serial killer."

"Then there's the other delinquent teams," Natalia said, "The group that lost a member might assume the other groups killed him and get revenge."

"That's terrible. I don't think they'd be that stupid, though," Larry remarked.

"I do wonder. People prove themselves capable of great atrocities when placed under pressure—"

"Excuse me, everyone," Mrs. Ruf said, entering the dining room. All eyes were on her. "Pardon me for interrupting. We have a guest here asking for you, Miss Jenny. He says he needs to speak to you right away."

Jenny furrowed her brow. "Who?"

Before Mrs. Ruf could answer, Seron realized who it was.

"Let him in, Jenny."

Jenny was quick to realize as well.

“Ah! I see. Please let him in, Auntie.”

“Of course.”

Once Mrs. Ruf was gone, the others asked Jenny and Seron who it was.

But before they could respond, a set of footsteps began running down the hall.

“This is bad, Jenfie! You gotta help us!” the boy cried, rushing into the dining room. The others had their answer.

Jenny first offered tea to Neil, who was still gasping for breath.

Neil downed the cool tea without even taking a seat and thought about what to say first.

Then,

“The Wolves’ second-in-command just got stabbed to death last night! And right in this area!”

“We know. And?” Jenny urged him.

“...You know? Okay. So everyone’s out for blood,” Neil said between half-sobs.

“Could you elaborate for us, Neil?” asked Seron. “How did you find out about the murder?”

“I went into town this morning to get the newspaper, and a bunch of guys talked to me one after another... And they’re all big shots, too. They never even used to look at me.”

“It’s because you’re not in any of the groups, Neil. The Wolves and Hunters lost their members to murder and a mysterious accident, so they would obviously want to know what the other groups are up to. And the Jackals and Government are desperate to tell them that they didn’t do anything. I’m guessing that the boys all said they’d let you join if you helped them out?” Seron conjectured. Neil’s jaw dropped.

“Y-y-you know everything! Are you a mind-reader or something?”

“No, I’m not. Anyway, you kept your promise with Jenny and came straight over here instead of joining any of the groups. I’m proud of you.”

Jenny nodded. “True, true. Good job, Neil. So Jackals and Government are saying they didn’t do anything, right?”

“Yeah! They didn’t kill anyone, I’m sure of it! But the adults and the police are suspecting them because they did some pretty bad stuff before. What do we do now? What can we do?” Neil fretted, his small size all the more prominent now that he was panicking.

Seron and Jenny fell into silence.

Larry and the others waited, knowing that Seron and Jenny were in deep thought.

“Please! You gotta help us!” Neil cried, the only one moving in the dining room.

Seron replied first, “There’s not much we can do.”

Neil looked like he was about to burst into tears.

Then Seron added, “But we’ll do everything we *can* do.”

A smile rose to Neil’s face. Jenny chimed in.

“Sure. We’ll try what we can.”

“So what exactly are we gonna do, Seron?” asked Larry.

“First, we’ll meet members from all the groups and tell them about the serial killer, and instruct them to halt all activities so they can avoid suspicion. What do you think, Jenny?”

“Dunno. We’re not locals, so all we can do is hope they believe us.”

No sooner had Jenny finished did Meg raise her voice.

“And we must tell that, ‘Please do not go around the town at night at all!’”

Natalia agreed. “Yeah. Tell ‘em to stay home like good kids.”

“That sounds like a feasible plan. What next?” asked Nick.

“I’m still wondering if we should talk to the police one more time. There’s not much else we can do right now.”

“Then it’s settled—we’re going into town. I’ll have Mr. Kurtz get the car ready,” Jenny said.

Meg seemed worried. “Did Mr. Kurtz not sleep last evening?”

“He can last two or three days without sleep.”

“I understand. Then...” Meg trailed off.

“This is going to throw us completely off-schedule as far as the camp’s concerned. Are you okay with that, Jenny?”

“I exercise my right as the president to give us a special exemption.”

* * *

After breakfast, they got ready to leave.

“Wait, we’re *all* going? The girls should stay behind—” Larry began. But Natalia cut him off.

“Not like the chief’s gonna stay even if you made her. And I’m coming too. So you want us to leave Megmica all by herself here?”

Jenny slung her camera bag over her shoulder.

Once they were ready to go, Jenny summoned Kurtz and Litner and told them about their plans for the day.

Neither Kurtz nor Litner seemed to be particularly thrilled. But—

“Please...”

Neil was on the verge of tears.

“This is an order.”

And Jenny was being as stubborn as a bull. They had no choice but to follow orders.

“Miss Jenny, we will agree only on the condition that you allow us to closely accompany you.”

Kurtz and Litner would each drive a convertible, as only the limousine could fit all eight of them at once.

Neil insisted on taking his bicycle, but Seron convinced him to join the others on the convertible.

“Larry, you take the motorcycle. You’ll be in charge of delivering messages if anything happens.”

“Got it.”

Larry picked up his helmet and goggles as Seron instructed. He refused to take Natalia along this time, but grabbed a spare helmet just in case.

“Let’s go.”

The two convertibles and the motorcycle left the villa and drove onto the street.

Seron was riding shotgun. As the car passed the gate and made a left turn, he spotted Meg in the car ahead bowing her head at the now-clean spot where the boy had died.

Seron also observed a moment of silence.

On the way to town, Nick asked Seron a question from the back.

“Will we be assisting in solving this mystery and catching the culprit again?”

Seron thought for a moment before responding. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh? Why might that be?”

“Because if our guess is right, we’re up against a serial killer. That’s not someone we can take on.”

“I suppose so, but we have Mr. Kurtz and Ms. Litner with us.”

Litner broke her silence.

“I’m afraid we are firmly opposed to exposing Miss Jenny to danger,” she said quickly.

Neil, sitting beside Nick, shrank apologetically.

“I’m not willing to take that risk either, Nick,” Seron said, looking straight ahead. “No offense, but sometimes you can get a little too hot-headed about things.”

“I see. My apologies,” Nick replied with a smile.

Litner frowned, glancing at Nick through the rear-view mirror.

* * *

The two convertibles and the motorcycle stopped in front of the restaurant at the center of town, where the group had eaten the previous day.

Kurtz and Litner parked on the roadside (which was not illegal) and scanned the area as the newspaper club and Neil walked through the town.

Though there had been a murder the day before, the air was fresh and crisp. There were few people or cars on the road because it was still during work hours.

Neil first led the group to a hardware store a short distance from the village center.

The store was part of a small residential building. Frying pans and pots hung from the ceiling. Litner stood guard outside, and the others entered the store. The tiny store quickly became crowded.

Because the hardware store did not sell products that people used every day, there were no other customers. Neil walked further into the store, to the person the group was there to see.

A tall boy about 18 years of age sat at the counter, clearly annoyed. Perhaps he had been forced to watch the store while he was on summer break. The boy noticed Neil.

“Hey there, kid. Find out anything?”

But he soon spotted the people coming up behind Neil—six teenagers who were clearly outsiders, and an imposing bodyguard.

“Wh-what the?” he squawked. “Who are these people, Neil?!”

“Calm down, second-in-command of the Jackals,” Jenny said. The boy’s reaction to being calmed down and identified by a clearly younger, smaller girl was predictable.

“D-don’t make me laugh!”

“We’re just here to talk to you,” Seron said calmly from behind Jenny.

“Get outta here! What—”

“We were witnesses last night.”

“Wh-what? What’d you see?”

Seron did his best to remain calm as he replied,

“We saw someone die of numerous stab wounds before our eyes, losing all hope and desperately begging for help as he breathed his last.”

The boy was silent.

“We just want to talk to you.”

“A-about what?”

Fortunately, no other customers showed up. Seron explained to the boy as much as he could about the things that had happened so far.

He told the boy that the car crash might have been a murder. That if the same person were behind all three of the deaths, the killer would doubtless come after members of the other groups.

And that the delinquent groups would be suspected by the police until the serial killer was caught.

In other words, the delinquent groups would either be treated as murderers, be targeted by the killer, or both for the foreseeable future.

“Damn it...why’d this have to happen? We didn’t do anything wrong. We just wanted to mess around and have fun. Nobody wants to murder anyone here,” the boy agonized, his head in his hands.

“There’s no way these guys are behind this,” Larry whispered to Nick, Natalia, and Meg as he watched the older boy.

“Indeed.” “Yeah,” Nick and Natalia agreed.

“Yes.” Meg also nodded.

Seron then gave the boy several warnings.

That he should spread these warnings to the others as quickly as possible; that the group should avoid gathering as much as possible in order to avert suspicion; that they should avoid going out at night, whether alone or with the others; and that they should ignore members of other groups as much as possible.

“Got that? Please don’t do anything rash,” Jenny said, “You’re the ones in most danger here.”

“All right. I got it. Thanks a lot—I’ll make sure to tell the others, too.” The boy nodded. Jenny smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

They left the hardware store.

“Now we’ll go to the butcher shop. That’s where the leader of the Hunters works. It’s a bit of a walk, but it’s the closest place from here.”

Neil led everyone past the town hall and into an alley. Three-story buildings lined the alley, and stone tiles paved the ground underneath.

“The local police station’s nearby,” Jenny whispered to Seron. “Are we going?”

“After we’ve met all the groups,” he replied.

The group of nine passed the Ercho Village police station, where only one police officer stood on guard, and emerged from the alley—

“H-hey! What are you kids doing here?”

A man walked out of the police station and raised his voice.

The newspaper club turned.

“Huh?” “Oh?” “Hm?” “What?” “Ah...” “No way!”

Almost in unison, the six students gasped.

A man in his late twenties walked down the stairs in front of the station. His short brown hair was slicked back, and he wore a navy suit with a tie.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” asked Jenny.

“That’s my line,” replied Hartnett of the Confederation Police.

* * *

“Ah, a newspaper club camp. Must be nice to be young.”

Seron and the others decided to put off the visit to the butcher shop and headed to Huckanee Memorial Park with Hartnett.

They sat in a circle on the grass as though they were there on a picnic, to make sure passersby could not listen in.

Jenny introduced Hartnett to the bodyguards, who could hardly believe the coincidence. Jenny told them that she would explain the details later, and sent Neil away with Kurtz and Litner.

Once Kurtz and the others were sitting on a bench far enough that they would not be overheard, the discussion began in earnest.

“What are you doing in this little town, Mr. Hartnett?” Jenny asked.

“For work,” Hartnett replied, “Though I can’t tell you all the details. I’m surprised we ran into each other like this. Small world, huh?” he mused.

“Do you know about the serial murders taking place in this village?” Seron asked gravely.

“What? ...No.”

Seron gave Hartnett a quick explanation about the things that had happened recently. Hartnett listened carefully.

“That’s the first I’ve heard. No, I mean it. I could tell the police here were investigating something, but I didn’t want to poke my nose in. And I know what you’re thinking; but I’m not here to investigate the recent killings.”

Seron gave Hartnett a quizzical look.

Nick said, “If memory serves, Mr. Hartnett, members of the Confederation Police are mandated to work in pairs for all investigations. The rule was set in place 24 years ago after a lone investigator was murdered by drug dealers.”

“Hmph. Of all the obscure trivia... Yes, Nicholas. You’re correct.”

“Then would your partner happen to be invisible?”

“We could really use an invisible officer on the force. Even better if it’s a woman.”

“Then have you come all this way alone?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I suppose you’re not in a rush to solve this case of yours. What brings you to this village?”

“Let’s not quietly lead me into questions I might not want to answer,” Hartnett chuckled wryly, but he quickly noticed the newspaper club’s curious gazes.

“Heh...” he sighed. “All right. I’ll tell you. But let’s be clear here. This has nothing to do with what you’re investigating right now. I can’t cooperate with you. And I hope I don’t need to remind you that this is all top-secret.”

“Of course,” Seron replied on everyone’s behalf.

Hartnett looked around once more to check that no one was listening.

“I’m after a wanted serial killer.”

The newspaper club was taken aback. Hartnett smiled.

“See? Totally different case.”

“A serial killer? Could you give us more details?” asked Seron.

“A pro.”

“A pro?”

“Yeah. A freelance assassin. He was a professional killer who was hired by the Capital District mafia about 20 years ago. He’s killed at least 14 people in Roxche alone—he used guns, knives, poison, bombs, you name it. And yet he was skilled enough to evade arrest. We didn’t even know about him until the mafia boss was arrested 15 years ago and he made a deal with us. The Confederation Police put out a warrant for him and tried to track him down, but we never managed to. Since we don’t have a statute of limitations, we’ll be chasing him down forever.”

“And you’ve come alone to this village to find such a terrible criminal? I’m not sure I see the reasoning.”

“I agree. But once we get a tip, we’re obligated to check the info to see if it’s accurate.”

“So you received some information about the killer?”

“Yeah. Mundane stuff—someone saying they saw the guy in town. Someone tipped us off anonymously last night, saying the killer lives here. We don’t usually pay a lot of attention to calls like that, but—”

“The police had no choice, considering the infamy of this man?”

“Yeah. I was the lucky bastard who got the job. Why they didn’t send a local I’ll never understand. I drove all the way here last night and I am exhausted. I stopped at a rest area for a bit, but that wasn’t much help.”

“I see. What did the local police say?”

“I showed them the warrant and asked for cooperation, but they said they didn’t have any info about the guy. Obviously, he must have gotten plastic surgery.”

“Of course.” Seron nodded.

“Th-that must be it, then!” Larry cut in. “That wanted man! The killer! Maybe he’s behind the deaths here? If he’s really a pro, he could have killed them without even blinking!” he raved.

“Oh!” Meg exclaimed.

But the others did not react.

“But for what?” Hartnett said plainly.

“Pardon me?” Larry froze. Hartnett repeated himself.

“Why would a wanted man kill three teenagers in a village like this?”

“Huh? ... You’re right. I see.”

Realizing that he could not answer the question, Larry hung his head and shrank. Meg also nodded.

“He’s been on the run for 15 years, and he’s guaranteed the death penalty if he’s ever caught. And this man’s a professional who’s only killed for work. There’s no way he’d suddenly switch to something this trivial. —Not saying that the deaths themselves are trivial, of course.”

The newspaper club fell into thought.

“Anyway, I’ll have a look around town and see if I can get some eyewitness accounts. Then I can finally make the long, long drive back to the capital. I wonder if there’s an inn around here I can get some sleep at.”

“Pardon? You will not help with us after?” Meg pleaded, but Hartnett shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but the Confederation Police doesn’t have jurisdiction over this case. It’s up to Daurade’s own police force. It’s just like how Roxchean police have no right to investigate cases in Sou Be-Il.”

“I understand this. But...”

Meg trailed off sadly. Seron glanced at her before looking back to Hartnett.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Hartnett.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.”

“If it’s all right with you, why not stay the night at Jenny’s relatives’ villa with us?”

“Hm?”

Seron then asked Jenny for permission.

“Well, sure. It’s not like you’re a stranger. We can give you free room and board. Consider it my exercising my civic duty.” Jenny nodded.

Hartnett thought for a moment. Then he looked up.

“I get it. You’re going to use me for all I’m worth, am I right? Since I won’t have anything to do once I get information about my serial killer.”

“Yes,” Seron said bluntly. Hartnett chuckled.

“I’ll think about it. Give me the villa’s contact info.”

Jenny wrote out the villa’s phone number and address in her notepad and tore out the page for Hartnett.

“Then I’ll see you guys around. I’m not too worried about you since you have bodyguards, but don’t go rushing into trouble.”

Hartnett said goodbye to the newspaper club, nodded at the bodyguards, and left the park.

Natalia said, “Adults have it rough, eh?”

“I do understand them, but it is a bit cold.” Meg still seemed a little angry.

“There’s not much we can do about that, I’m afraid,” Nick said.

Larry dusted himself off and rose to his feet. “Well? What now, Seron?”

“Let’s go meet the other groups.”

“All right,” Larry agreed easily.

“Actually, about your suggestion earlier—” Seron said, looking up.

“Huh? Oh, about Mr. Hartnett’s guy being our culprit? You’re right. It was a pretty stupid idea. The guy doesn’t have any reason to kill local delinquents.” Larry chuckled. But Seron did not.

“—In other words, give this killer a motive and he just might be the man we’re looking for.”

“I guess so,” Larry muttered blankly. But Seron said no more and rose to his feet.

“Let’s go meet the Hunters.”

* * *

When they entered the butcher shop, they were greeted by the middle-aged shopkeeper.

“Uncle and Auntie are regulars here. Last night’s meat was from here, too,” Jenny whispered, and then told the man that they were not there to shop.

The shopkeeper gave them a quizzical look. Jenny asked if the boy they were looking for was there.

“He’s in the back, yes. Has he done something to offend you?” the shopkeeper asked worriedly, but Nick smiled.

“Not at all, sir. Neil here simply made your son mad once because he broke a promise. Neil came to our villa and said that he wanted to apologize, but did not have the courage to do so alone. So we’ve come to lend him our support. May we have a moment of your son’s time?”

The shopkeeper nodded and went into the back. Natalia seemed impressed.

“Lying right through your teeth. Not bad at all, Nicholas Browning.”

“Deception can be a tool of sorts. And is this not precisely the type of emergency that demands such extreme measures?”

“Sure. Good going, Nick,” Jenny said.

That was when a large boy in his late teens emerged from the back. He did not even try to hide his surprise at seeing the group.

The newspaper club brought the leader of the Hunters outside and once again explained the situation.

They had Kurtz and Litner keep their distance for the time being to make sure the discussion did not involve adults in any way.

At first the boy was furious with Neil for not carrying out his request and lying to bring him out, but when he heard that his friends might have actually been murdered, and that their group might be suspected for the previous night’s murder, he went silent.

And finally,

“All right. I’ll keep the boys in line for now. I promise. Thanks for the warning.”

The boy responded almost exactly as the Jackals’ second-in-command had done.

“Thank you for your time,” Seron said, turning—

“Wait!” The boy stopped him.

“What is it?”

“I...I thought the guys just got themselves into a stupid accident. That there was nothing we could do about it. But if you’re right, and they got killed by somebody...they’re not gonna rest in peace.”

“I understand.”

“If the cops aren’t looking, and if they’re just suspecting us... I’m counting on you guys to find the killer.”

“...We can’t guarantee anything, but we will do our best. So—”

“I know. I’ll keep the gang outta trouble.”

Chapter 7: The Leaders

“All right, which one next? Government or Wolves?” Larry asked as they left the butcher shop and stepped onto the main road.

“Er... Government has a hangout nearby, just down the street. Whaddaya wanna do?” Neil replied. Seron glanced at his watch. There was still a little more than an hour before noon.

“Let’s go,” said Jenny. But Neil seemed even more reluctant this time.

“But Government’s the scariest gang around. The leader’s real bad and he picks fights all the time. And he always says, ‘I only listen to people who’re stronger than me. And since no one’s stronger than me, I don’t listen to nobody’.”

Seron thought before replying, “That’s not good. With an attitude like that he’s only going to garner suspicion from the police.”

“But we can’t just ignore him,” said Jenny. Seron nodded.

“What if we get Mr. Kurtz to lead?” Natalia suggested from behind.

Seron shook his head. “I don’t think we should do that. Mr. Kurtz could obviously beat him, but we can’t get a conversation going if we hide behind an armed adult to negotiate. We’re not going there to just give them a warning; we need to completely convince Government to lay low for a while.”

“True,” Natalia admitted.

“Going is the only road,” Meg declared.

Seron cast Meg a glance and went silent.

Nick walked up next to Seron and matched his pace. “Seron, there seems to be a dilapidated fence ahead.”

When Seron looked up, he spotted an empty lot by the road. He also saw the remains of a fence that had once kept the lot secure.

Metal shafts had been driven into the ground, with rope strung between them. But most of the ropes were gone and the shafts were leaning or had already fallen. No one seemed to be maintaining the fence.

“That shaft just may make the perfect staff.”

Without a word, Seron turned to Nick.

The shafts were about 1.8 meters in length. Seron picked one up as he walked. It was clean with almost no hint of rust. The shaft was thin and hollow, which made it lighter than it seemed.

Seron used the shaft—which was taller than he was—as he might a wizard’s staff as he walked onward.

“Since when were you in the 60-plus club, Seron?” Natalia joked.

“It’s just a change of pace,” Seron lied.

About 300 meters on, they were out of the town center.

There were no more stores by the roadside, only the remains of small car factories and abandoned construction materials. The only other things of note were empty lots and a few crumbling houses. Naturally, no one was walking around.

Neil led the group into a ruined building in an abandoned lot. Supposedly it had once been a garage. There stood a rusted car, covered in grass and becoming one with the earth.

The battered shutter was down, making it impossible to see inside. But from the two small motorcycles and several cars parked outside it was clear that people were inside.

“In here. But are you sure about this? It’s not too late to back out,” Neil said hesitantly.

“I’m afraid I have to agree,” Kurtz said. Litner gave a silent nod from the back of the group.

“We’re just going to have to try our best,” Seron said, still holding the makeshift staff.

“We’ve come this far—there’s no backing out now,” Jenny agreed.

Kurtz sighed. “Then allow us to come with you and stand at the very back.”

Seron turned to Meg and Natalia.

“We’re coming too.” Natalia said before he could even open his mouth.

“Then stick close to Mr. Kurtz,” Seron said, and turned to Nick. “Here. Hold on to this.” He handed Nick the shaft.

“Of course.” Nick accepted it with a beautiful smile. Seron lowered his voice.

“It’s just a staff, Nicholas Browning.”

“I understand, Seron Maxwell.”

“And we’re not criminals.”

“Of course.”

* * *

The garage interior was surprisingly tidy.

All the abandoned materials and rubble had been pushed against the wall, exposing the concrete floor. The windows high up on the walls were mostly intact, and the cracked panes were sealed meticulously with tape.

The garage was furnished with an old table and several chairs. When the group entered, they found eight boys discussing something. They ranged in age from their early teens to about 19. All of them were locals.

The boys were shocked when they spotted Seron and the others entering the garage. The tallest boy—who seemed to be the oldest—stood and bellowed at him.

“What the hell? We ain’t done anything!”

“Of course,” Seron replied calmly.

“We ain’t done anything! This here’s our turf, who let you in?”

The boy’s deep voice resounded through the garage.

The boy—the leader—maintained a belligerent attitude. The others kept their mouths shut, waiting to see what would happen.

Kurtz, standing at the very back of the group with Meg and Natalia, whispered, “He’s terrified.”

“Really?” Natalia replied, as relaxed as ever.

“Yes. He knows they’re being suspected and that they may be attacked. He’s raising his voice to try and stave off that terror.”

“I see. So that’s why they’re all gathered together here.”

“The leader’s not doing a very good job of staying calm enough to lead.”

“Looks like some muscle and a big name are all he’s got going for him. Don’t know if I’ve got any right to say this, but talk about one hell of a bluff.”

“If anything should happen, I’ll fire a warning shot into the ceiling. Your ears may ring, so I’d like to ask for your understanding ahead of time.”

Seron, Jenny, and Neil (standing between them) did not hear Kurtz because they were slowly approaching the members of Government.

Seron and Jenny were confident enough, but Neil was visibly frightened.

“I feel kinda sorry for the kid,” Larry said from behind them.

The three came to a stop about 10 meters from the members of Government.

“We’re here to give you some advice, but it looks like you’re already on the case,” Jenny said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Shaddap! Leave!” the leader cried, refusing to cooperate.

Jenny and Seron fell into thought, wondering how they should approach. Meanwhile, Neil trembled as though he were ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.

“What do you think?” Larry asked Nick, who was still holding the staff. Nick’s answer was brutally honest.

“The other members aside, there is absolutely no merit in assisting the leader.”

“That’s straightforward of you.”

“I believe Seron and Jenny could be forgiven for ignoring this group and moving on. Perhaps we should stop by somewhere afterwards for lunch.”

“Now that you mention it, I *am* getting kinda hungry.” Larry shrugged. The leader continued his tirade.

“Don’t you look your nose down on me, punk! We know you rich folks all think us villagers’re buffoons!”

‘Rest of the village aside, he’s certainly not giving us any reason not to think otherwise about him,’ Larry thought, but did not say.

“It’s not a good idea to congregate here,” said Seron.

“Shaddap! Don’t tell me what to do!”

“The police will assume you’re up to something, and at the same time you’ll make yourselves a perfect target for the killer.”

“I told you to shut your hole! We can take care of ourselves just fine. Get out!”

“We’re talking about a hardened serial killer.”

“Doesn’t matter! Us buddies can take it!”

“I can’t say with complete certainty, but the victims of the car crash two days ago may have been shot while driving. How do you intend to fight back against someone who is armed with a gun?”

“Th-that’s what we’re all together for! We’re all ready to pound this guy into the pavement!”

“That isn’t very apparent. You even let our group inside without resistance.”

“We just let our guard down’s all!”

“Again, you are placing yourselves in grave danger by gathering here. No one will come to help even if you scream for help. It’s safer to go back to your homes and stay with your families. The killer won’t be able to easily strike in places where adult witnesses are present.”

“I said! We’re taking care of ourselves!”

“It’s not too late. You can head to the village center together and disband there.”

“Shaddap! The only thing that matters here is power, and I only listen to the strongest! And that’s me!”

“Someone stronger than you, who has no reservations about murder, will come to find you here.”

“Which is why we’re all together here, dumbass!”

A long and pointless conversation continued between Seron and the leader across the 10-meter distance. And eventually—

“... Yeah, I see now!” the leader said suddenly.

Seron and the others hoped the leader had finally seen the light, but their hopes were cruelly dashed.

“You guys are behind all this, aren’t you?!”

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding... ‘Dense’ doesn’t even cut it with this guy. Talk about going above and beyond all expectations,” Larry groaned, his hands on his head.

But Nicholas was completely nonchalant. “Actually Larry, Seron *did* in fact foresee this.” He took out a hairband from his pocket.

“Hm?”

As Larry watched, Nick propped up his staff against his chest and put his hairband in his mouth. He raised his hands behind his back and gathered his long hair, and with one hand around the ponytail and the hairband in the other he tied it up neatly.

Then he raised his ponytail again and secured it once more with the hairband to hold it up.

“There.”

Nick took the staff in one hand and walked over to Seron.

“Hey.” Larry tried to stop him.

“Not to worry, Larry. Wait there and take care of the girls should anything happen,” Nick replied, turning. Though a little skeptical, Larry did as he was asked.

Seron and Jenny turned when they heard the staff.

“Not bad. It looks pretty good on you.”

“The hairstyle, Jenny? Or the staff?”

“The hair, obviously. What’re you doing here?”

“I am here as Neil’s substitute. Good work, Neil. Go back to the others.”

Nick came over to Seron, Jenny, and Neil, and gestured for Neil to retreat.

“Can I really?”

A moment’s hesitation later, Neil ran to Larry.

“Aha! Cat got your tongue, eh? So I was right!” the leader of Government sneered, making yet another mistaken assumption.

“Perhaps the Roxchean word ‘hopeless’ was invented for him?” Nick joked.

“Maybe.” “You might be on to something.”

Nick added that he would ask his father later about the etymology of the word.

“I thought you were just a pack of rich idiots, but who knew you’d actually be *criminals*? You’re not fooling anyone! You were gonna make us drop our guard, am I right? The killings started after you lot got here. It makes perfect sense!”

The leader’s one-man show continued. But Seron and the others were barely listening.

In fact, they were more concerned with the members of Government—all clearly confused, almost to the point of being pitiful. They seemed to be acknowledging the absurdity of their leader’s accusations.

“Don’t know about that guy, but I wanna at least help the ones behind him,” said Jenny.

“Yeah.” “Indeed.”

Meanwhile,

“My goodness...why do those words simply not work?” Meg wondered sadly from behind.

“Isn’t it ‘bout time for one of those warning shots, Mr. Kurtz?” asked Natalia.

“Let’s be a little more patient,” Kurtz replied. “They say that guns should only be used as a last resort.”

“Do they? News to me.”

“Is that so? I’m also a little curious to see how Miss Jenny and the others will deal with this situation.”

“C’mon, just admit that’s the real reason.”

“Don’t just stand there, am I right or what?” the leader demanded. Seron finally spoke.

“I’m sorry to say your conjecture is incorrect. If we really were the ones behind the killings...”

“If?”

“...We would have killed you all already.”

All of Government—including the leader—paled.

“Not bad, Seron,” Natalia mumbled.

“Like hell! Get ‘em, boys!” the leader bellowed. But no one moved.

No one argued; the leader must have been a domineering influence over his gang. But the members could not carry out such a blatantly impossible order.

Seven unfortunate boys trembled silently, at a complete loss.

“Seron, is it not about time for us to take our leave?” Nick whispered.

Seron glanced at his profiled face.

“Let us depart for lunch.”

Nick sounded so calm that Jenny threw him a quizzical look. “You mean you’re gonna take care of this?”

“With your permission, yes.”

“...What’s that mean?”

That was when Seron broke his silence with an unusually loud sigh.

Then,
“Do something about the leader, Nicholas.”
“Of course.”
“But please try to convince him *verbally*.”
“I understand.”

“Don’t worry, everyone. Mr. Kurtz,” Seron said. At the same time, Nick strode forward.
“Huh?”

The leader stared blankly at Nick, standing stock-still at the table.

Only when there were about four meters left between them did the leader finally regain his senses and point an accusing finger at Nick.

“What’re you tryin’ to pull?”

An elegant smile rose to Nick’s beautiful face.

“I simply wish to speak to you.”

“About what? We ain’t listening to a buncha murderers!” the leader cried, and drew a weapon.

A sock.

A long sock layered into two and stuffed with sand. It was an easy weapon to make and considerably powerful to boot, dense enough to easily knock out someone with a blow to the head.

The leader held the sock by the end and wrapped it around his hand.

“Now I’ve got no choice but to fight. I gotta fight and protect myself.” he said firmly, still under a terribly mistaken impression.

The members of Government oohed and aahed behind him. “That’s the boss for ya!” one of them cried.

The leader lightly swung his arm and stepped forward.

“Beg for mercy now and maybe I’ll let you off easy.”

Nick’s answer was immediate.

“My apologies.”

“What?”

“My sincerest apologies. It seems I now have a reason to strike you. I do not intend to gravely injure you, but this will hurt. I will not hesitate. I would like to apologize in advance.”

“I hope this will do the trick...” Seron mumbled.

The leader, oblivious to Seron’s hopes, was apoplectic.

“Asshole!”

He charged forward, winding back his right arm.

In an instant Nick tightened his grip on the staff. With his right hand he held the top, and with his left hand he held a slightly lower point with an inverse grip.

“TAKE THIS!”

Nick took an evasive step to the right and swung the staff upwards.

The tip of the staff nearly glanced the floor as it cut through the air, striking the base of the leader's right hand before it could reach Nick.

"Argh!"

There was a scream as the leader's fist was knocked upwards. He dropped his weapon.

Nick pulled the staff back towards himself as though gliding, and grabbed the end that had struck the leader with his left hand. Then he put his right hand closer to his left with an inverse grip.

And, barely moving his arms, he swung the staff at the leader's left shin.

Whoosh.

"Agh!"

The two sounds melded into one.

The leader was forced into an awkward stance, holding up his right hand and curling his left leg. Nick lightly prodded him in the chest with the staff.

That was enough to push the leader to the floor, sending him straight onto his back.

The members of Government were furious at the sight of their leader being so easily defeated.

"Damn you!"

A fat boy to Nick's right leapt off his chair. Another boy, this one on Nick's left, stood a moment later.

The fat boy used his build to his advantage, charging forward at Nick using all his weight as momentum.

Nick waited for his opponent to draw near, then bowed low like a cat and swung wide from right to left.

It was the kind of mundane movement one used to sweep leaves in the yard, but the staff connected with the boy's heel.

"Whoa!"

Tripping over his own legs, the boy fell forward and landed on his portly stomach, sliding.

The boy rushing from Nick's left jumped over his falling friend.

"Got you!"

And he swung his right arm at Nick as he rose.

Nick held the staff upright and stopped the punch at the wrist. At the same time, he slid, swinging the right side of the staff towards the back of his opponent's neck and sidestepping as he swung down again.

The boy fell forward and hit the ground shoulder-first.

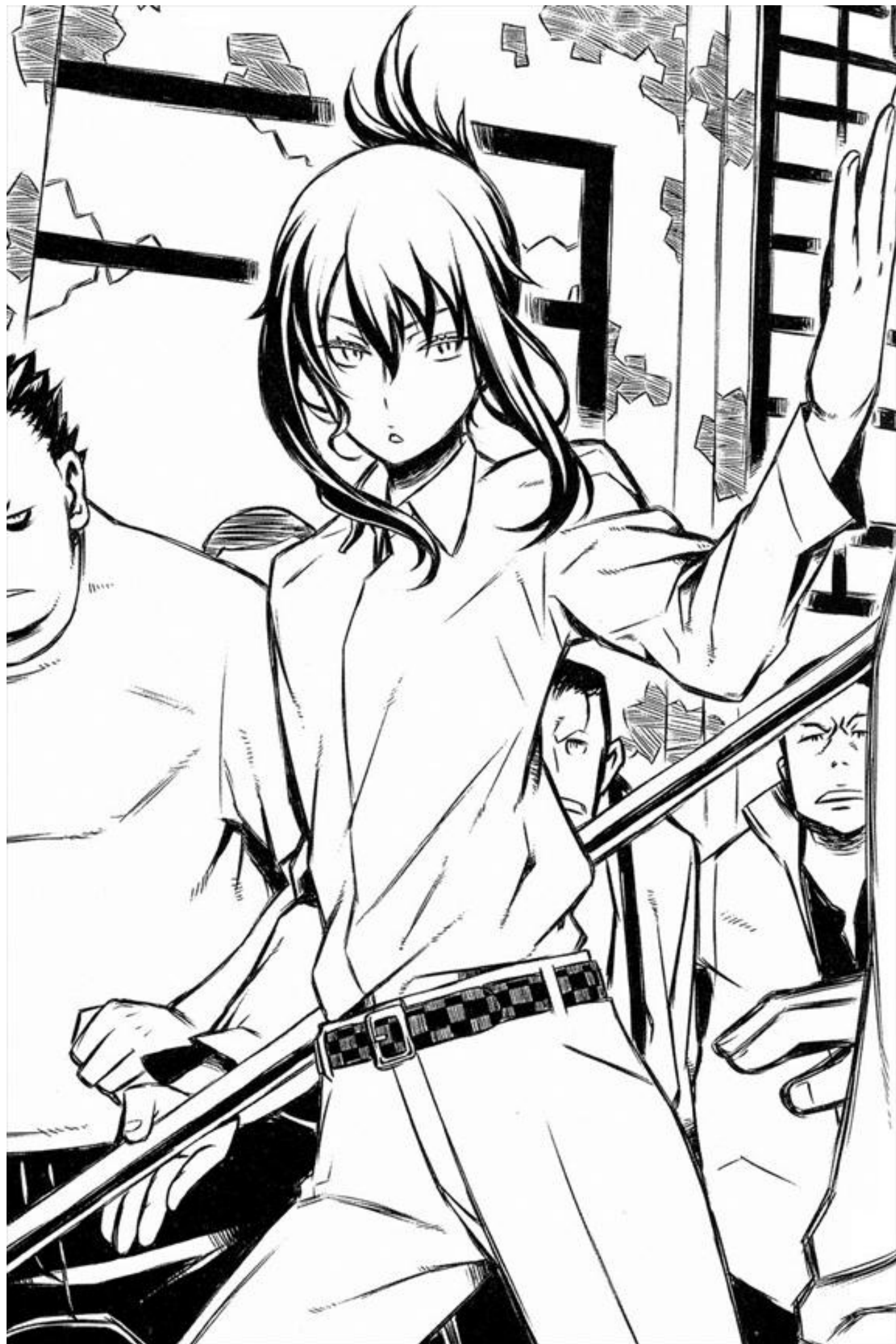
Nick let the staff slide down and took three steps back, then pointed the end at the boy. He took a quick breath, followed by a pause, followed by a long exhale.

It had taken him all of 10 seconds to flatten the three boys.

Nick looked over the fallen delinquents and the five remaining boys.

"Shall we continue? I could certainly do with a little more exercise," he asked with a beautiful smile.

"No." "It's okay." "No thanks." "I'm good." "Nah."



“That was awesome!” Larry cried incredulously at the sight of Nick’s elegant flurry of attacks.

Neil stood beside Larry with his jaw agape.

“Not bad, Nicholas Browning.”

“My goodness...”

Natalia and Meg were also floored by the display. Kurtz alone seemed to be completely unfazed.

“Mhm. Impressive.”

“Hey. Seron Maxwell.”

“Yes, Jenny Jones?”

“How long have you know about this? How long did you know our pretty boy was actually a martial arts master?”

“For a while.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it never came up.”

“You’re the one who brought the staff along.”

“Just in case.”

“You didn’t think Mr. Kurtz could take care of them?”

“I would have, if push came to shove. But sometimes it’s better to solve things without getting an adult involved.”

“Tch. Fine. Now let’s have a talk with Government.”

Jenny went up to the boys. The three who had lost to Nick were just beginning to get back up.

“Listen up, guys. I’m sick of trying to argue, so I’m gonna make it simple.”

Nick had dropped his stance and was standing casually. Jenny stood beside him and towered over the eight dazed boys.

“We’re not the killers. And from now on, I’m the leader of Government!”

“What?” the leader squawked, rubbing his aching right hand. The others were equally astonished.

“We beat you, which means it’s time for a change around here. You’re the one who said you only listen to whoever’s stronger than you. Does a man ever go back on his word?”

“Uhh...”

The leader could not retort. Nick spoke instead.

“Oh? You’ll be taking charge here then, Jenny?”

“Yeah. I can run two jobs easy.”

“Then what of my accomplishments? There was so much I was hoping to do with the position of leader.”

“I’ll officially recognize your accomplishments later, Nick.”

“Is that really all?”

“Yeah.”

Having taken the position of leader over Government, Jenny gave orders to her new underlings.

That the boys should not congregate together until the culprit had been caught and the case closed. That they should remain shut up quietly in their homes. That they should do absolutely nothing even if they were to encounter other delinquents. That if they were clear on the instructions, they should immediately return home.

The former leader straddled his motorcycle and gave the new leader a skeptical look.

“You’re seriously not the killers?”

“No. And I’ll give you back the position once my vacation ends and I go back home.”

“Right...so I just gotta lay low for a while.”

“I’d tell you to lay low forever, but yeah. That’s the gist of it. Keep a low profile if you don’t wanna die.”

“Right.”

The delinquents scattered on their bicycles and motorcycles.

“My, I am feeling quite hungry after all that exercise.”

Nick tossed away his staff without a second thought.

Seron glanced at his watch. It was noon.

Chapter 8: The Photographs

Two cars and a motorcycle were traveling down the village road.
Larry rode slowly to avoid crashing into the cars and mumbled to himself.
“So we’re finally done talking to the leaders. But still...”

Earlier—
“Right. The cops told us to keep a low profile too. Just... lease find whoever killed our friend.”

“We’ll do what we can.”

The conversation between Jenny and the leader of the Wolves ended in less than a minute.

Seron, Jenny, and Neil left the leader’s house, rejoined the others, and gave their report.

Larry called the police from a nearby phone booth and asked if they had found the culprit. He did not receive a satisfactory answer.

After discussing their next plan of action, the group finally gave in to their gnawing hunger and decided to go back to the villa.

Once they returned, the newspaper club washed their hands and went to the kitchen. Neil was also invited to eat, so he sat beside Jenny.

As soon as they sat down, Mrs. Ruf brought in a large, thin pizza. The first one was a meat-lover’s dream, topped with a heaping helping of bacon and sausage slices.

“There’s plenty more coming, so eat up! I’ll put on different toppings every time.”

When she cut the pizza with a knife, everyone rushed in and grabbed a slice.

Once everyone had a slice on their plate, there was only one left on the platter.

“If you’re gonna eat it anyway you might as well grab it now, Lia.”

“You are the most understanding man in the world, Larry. Thanks a bunch.”

Natalia took the final slice. Everyone was so starved that they ate in utter silence. The moment they finished the first pizza, the second came in. It was topped with tomato slices, ham, and basil.

As the pizzas came in one after another, the group discussed the progress they had made so far.

“It’s mission accomplished, for now,” said Seron.

“More or less. But we haven’t solved the problem. It’s not over until we catch the killer,” Larry nodded, reminding everyone of the root of their problem.

“Indeed. But our actions were not without purpose—we’ve even given Jenny a brand-new title,” Nick said with a smile.

“You’re still bitter about that? And how long are you gonna keep your hair up?” asked Jenny. Nick had not yet untied his hair. He smiled and said he would let it down after lunch.

“I think it looks pretty cool, Nick,” said Natalia, “By the way, where’d you learn those wicked moves? Mr. Kurtz was all impressed on the way back. It’s called staff-fighting or something?”

Meg joined in as well. "It is. It was very surprising! You can do it if you try, Nick! —I am sorry, is my Roxchean speaking strange?"

"Why don'tcha ask Seron? Says he knew about this for a while," said Jenny.

"You really did know this, Seron?" Meg asked, turning.

"I saw him practice before, during equestrian class," Seron said, gulping down his tea.

"You said you've been learning since you were a kid, Nick?"

As the others nodded, Nick smiled and reached for a slice of pizza.

After the late lunch, the newspaper club and Neil found themselves relaxing as they discussed what to do next.

Though they wondered if they should go to the police again, Nick shot down the idea.

"It is not as though we have any new developments for them."

Everyone agreed. And there was nothing left to do.

"So now we just leave it to the cops. Unless the next murder or murder attempt happens in front of us, we can't do a thing."

Everyone had to nod. "Not that I'm *hoping* for another case," Natalia added.

Someone suggested going out for a change of pace. But,

"It is not good to make Mr. Kurtz feel more sleepy anymore, I think," Meg said. So the group decided to stay inside.

"You can go home now, Neil. Thanks," Jenny said. Litner offered to take him and his bicycle home by car.

"Thanks so much, everybody." Neil nodded, and left.

Ultimately, their plans for the afternoon were no different from the previous day's.

"So that's it then. Gotta let Mr. Kurtz rest too."

Jenny's suggestion was a siesta.

No one objected.

* * *

While the newspaper club and Kurtz, who had not slept a wink last night, were asleep—

"Thanks for waiting! Here's your photos!"

The owner of the village photography studio came to the villa in a three-wheeled car and handed Mrs. Ruf a large cardboard box.

Inside were the newspaper club's photos and the developed film.

Mrs. Ruf thanked the owner, paid a handsome fee, and received the box.

"I'll show them once they're all awake," she said to herself, and put the box on a table in the parlor.

* * *

"Ruf, huh. This is the place."

Hartnett leaned out the window of his black sedan and scrutinized the name on a panel outside the premises. His gaze then fell on the massive villa and the garden bursting with flowers in bloom.

“An honest-to-goodness mansion. So this is what they call a villa...” he grumbled, and stepped off the Jones Motors car.

Litner greeted Hartnett and led him to the parlor, informing him that everyone was asleep.

Hartnett idled in the parlor, drinking tea and examining the luxury furniture. He noticed the cardboard box on the table.

But he did not open it without permission.

Eventually, he dozed off in one of the expensive chairs decorating the room.

* * *

Like the previous day, the newspaper club woke up around five in the afternoon.

When they heard about the visitor they went to the parlor and found Hartnett. He woke in a hurry and rubbed his eyes.

“Hey there. I decided to take you up on your invitation.”

The newspaper club sat down around Hartnett and explained the progress they had made in the afternoon, then asked Hartnett about his assignment.

“I showed the wanted poster to most of the big establishments in town, but I got nothing. I’m going back to the Capital District tomorrow morning,” he replied, shaking his head.

Mrs. Ruf spoke up just as Hartnett and the newspaper club were starting on tea.

“Oh! Miss Jenny, your photographs are here. I left them on the table for you. I’m so terribly sorry; memories do get worse with age.”

Six sets of eyes turned to the cardboard box.

“Let us quickly look at the photographs,” Meg said excitedly. Jenny opened the box.

She set aside the film and pulled out the bundle of developed black-and-white photographs. They were printed on large B3 photo papers, measuring at 25 by 38 centimeters.

“Let’s flip through these before dinner. Anyone who’s wasted film on a bad shot has to do 10 laps around the track.”

“What track?” asked Larry.

“Fine. Ten laps around town.”

“No thanks.”

“So, whose is this?” asked Jenny.

At the top of the pile was a photo of the park fountain and a sheep statue. The image was focused on the sheep on the left side of the shot and the fountain was out of focus.

“That’s mine,” said Natalia. Then she furrowed her brow. “Why’s that one first? It’s the last one I took.”

“The order gets switched around when they’re developing, so your last picture comes to the top of the pile. This one’s not bad.”

“Not surprising.” Natalia grinned. “I’m good at everything.”

The next 20 photos depicted unremarkable things like scenes of the countryside or Larry and his motorcycle.

Jenny checked each photo, one after another. She passed the ones she had seen to the next person. Hartnett was last in line; he threw each picture an uninterested glance before piling it up with the rest.

Then came Larry's photos.

"Well, I got the exposure right."

Larry had indeed gotten the exposure right, but all of his photos were of his motorcycle.

"Ah, those would be mine."

Nick's photos included close-ups of a sheep's face, shots of a pouting Jenny, and Kurtz, Litner, and the car. Occasionally the photos were too dark, too bright, or out of focus.

"It's not as easy as swinging a staff."

"You need more training," Jenny said.

Next came Jenny's photos. She had chosen mostly the same subjects as Nick, but her exposure and focus were perfect.

"That's the president for you."

"Flattery won't get you out of special training hell, Nicholas Browning."

Next came Seron's photos.

About half were shots of pastoral landscapes. The rest depicted the flowers in Hannah's yard.

Like Natalia's, they were decently done and unremarkable. Meg was not in a single photo.

"Hm...kinda hard to judge," Jenny admitted. Hartnett, who had ended up in charge of organizing the photos, straightened the pile on the desk.

Last came Meg's photos.

The photo where Seron was supposed to be pushing the cow was taken with too shallow a depth of field, and the cow was out of focus. As for Seron, even his friends barely recognized him.

"My gosh... I am very sorry, Seron."

The photos of the flowers at the Lawrence manor, on the other hand, were perfectly in focus. Jenny was impressed.

"Nice work, Megmica. I can feel your love of flowers emanating from these photos."

"Hee hee. It is good to be praised."

Finally came the last photo.

It was the picture of the garden, taken from outside the gates.

"This one's pretty good too."

"Thank you, Jenny."

The last photo was also passed all the way to Hartnett.

Hartnett gave the photo a glance. "Is that it?" He asked, placing it at the top of the pile.

Then,

"Huh?"

He picked it up again.

Hartnett brought the photo all the way up to his eyes—specifically, he focused on the right side of the image. He paused for several seconds, but the newspaper club did not notice.

“We should go out for another photography session. Next time we’ll go as a group.” Jenny said. Everyone agreed.

Then—

“AH!” Hartnett cried. The newspaper club flinched. Meg, who had picked up her cup of tea, spilled a little on her shirt.

“What might be the matter, Mr. Hartnett? You gave us a fright.”

“Where?!” Hartnett demanded, his face pale. “The house in this photo—where is this house?!”

“In the area. Is something wrong?” Seron replied.

Hartnett held out the picture to Seron, pointing at the right side of the image.

“This man right here!”

Seron stared at the profiled face of Hampleton the gardener beside the flowerpots.

“Yes. He works at this house as a gardener—wait, you don’t mean...?”

He understood the implications quickly. Seron stared at the Confederation Police investigator before him.

“Yes! That’s exactly what I mean!” Hartnett replied resolutely. “This is the one! This is the man I’m looking for!”

Everyone but Seron cried out in surprise.

“What’s going on, then? We wanna know too,” Natalia said on everyone’s behalf. Hartnett threw the photo down on the table. Everyone scrutinized Hampleton.

“This man here! He’s the assassin the Confederation Police has been hunting down! Look at this.” Hartnett pulled out of his jacket a wanted poster.

Below the title of the poster were photos of an intimidating middle-aged man. The photos were taken from the front and the side.

The middle-aged man with a full beard, and the photo of Hampleton. There was no resemblance in their profiled faces.

Naturally, the man on the wanted poster looked younger and more threatening. He looked completely different from the skinny and beardless Hampleton, even accounting for the passage of time.

“You sure? They don’t look alike at all,” Natalia said.

“Me too... I do not see it that way...” Meg agreed. Nick simply tilted his head.

Seron examined the two photos again. Then he finally relented. “I can’t see the resemblance, either.”

“Lemme see,” Jenny finally said, reaching for the photos. She gave each a three-second glance. “It’s the same person,” she said matter-of-factly, as if she had just taste-tested the difference between salt and sugar.

“What makes you so sure?” asked Seron. Jenny’s answer was immediate.

“His ears.”

“What?”

Seron compared the photos again.

“Oh—”

He understood immediately.

The man in the wanted poster, and Hampleton in the garden—

Both had large, wide ears that curved inwards, with dangling earlobes.

Their ears were identical.

“People have differently-shaped ears, and once you finish puberty your ears never change shape for the rest of your life. They only discovered this recently, though,” Jenny explained.

“Yes! We found him! Excellent! Yes!” Hartnett cheered, filling the parlor with excitement.

“Mrs. Hannah is in a dangerous place!” Meg interjected, cutting the cheers short.

“The house is a short distance from here, and belongs to a Mrs. Hannah Lawrence. The man here is named Hampleton. He works as a gardener for Mrs. Lawrence and has her complete trust. Naturally, he must be keeping his past under wraps,” Seron explained.

“You’ve been a big help, Seron. Damn it! I can’t believe that phony tip turned out to be real!” Hartnett replied, trembling.

“If it turned out to be real, I don’t believe you could call it a phony tip,” Nick pointed out. But his comment went ignored.

Meg was sounding almost hysterical. “Wh-wh-what can we do?! It is dangerous! Mrs. Hannah is in a dangerous place! It is very dangerous!”

Hartnett got his emotions under control and took a seat once more.

“I couldn’t have done this without you guys. Thank you. Now that we know the truth, I promise I’ll do whatever I can for Mrs. Lawrence.”

“Then!” Larry piped up. “Then this guy’s the one who killed the local kids?”

“We can’t say yet,” Hartnett replied. “We’ll question him after we arrest him.”

“Right,” Larry mumbled.

“But what are you going to do? Wait for reinforcements?” asked Jenny. Hartnett looked like he had swallowed a bug.

“It takes at least three hours by car to the closest Confederation Police station. I suppose I could ask the local police for help, but...”

“The gardener’s gonna notice the second he spots the police cars. And he’ll take Mrs. Lawrence hostage for sure. We don’t know how far this guy’s willing to go,” Larry pointed out. Hartnett nodded.

“Couldn’t we get Mrs. Lawrence to come to this villa, then?” asked Seron.

Hartnett and Meg turned.

“Megmika and I had a pleasant chat with Mrs. Lawrence yesterday. We could give her a telephone call and say we want to give her copies of our photos and thank her for her hospitality. It’s reason enough to invite her without arousing suspicion.”

“You’re right. But does anyone else live with her? Any maids or other servants?”

“Not as far as we can tell. Although I can’t be certain...” Seron trailed off. Suddenly, Jenny stood and ran out of the parlor.

Ten seconds later.

"I just asked Auntie! Mrs. Lawrence doesn't have any live-in servants. She just gets someone to clean the place once a week. The gardener lives there, though," Jenny said as she returned.

"Great. Thank you, Jenny. Now we just need to call her over and surround the house," said Hartnett.

"I'll help," Seron volunteered. "I can make the call and invite her for dinner."

Because they could not think of any other plan, they went through with Seron's idea to invite Hannah over.

The newspaper club said nothing to Mr. and Mrs. Ruf save for the fact that they wanted an extra serving of dinner to be prepared. But they explained everything to Kurtz and Litner, who were shocked but in agreement with the plan.

"But," Kurtz added, "if Mrs. Lawrence does not accept the invitation, I can't let you leave for her home. Until this incident is finished, I will not let any of you leave the villa, Miss Jenny."

If Hannah were to ask for a ride, Kurtz, Hartnett, and Seron would go to pick her up.

"Wait, so what if Mrs. Lawrence declines by phone?" asked Natalia.

"The Confederation Police will launch a raid on the house and surround the premises. We'll make sure nothing leaves the building. We can even deploy snipers if necessary," Hartnett said reluctantly.

"That is horrible! It is very horrible!" Meg gasped, but Hartnett refused to yield.

"We'll never get another chance like this. If we lose him now, we might have to wait another 15 years before we find him again."

"I know this... I know this, but please do not let Mrs. Hannah cannot be hurt! I am begging you!" Meg pleaded. Hartnett smiled and winked.

"Don't worry about it. He still has no idea we've found him out, remember? He's found himself a safe position as a gardener, so he has no reason to out himself now."

"Y-yes, that is true," Meg replied, sounding a little less panicked. When Nick saw her relief, he pointed out Hartnett's lie to Seron.

"That would be true, if only not for the fact that the man has already taken three lives. If he truly is the culprit, he must be ready to flee at a moment's notice. We are in a race against time."

Seron nodded.

"Yeah. I know. So I'd better do a good job of inviting Mrs. Lawrence over."

Nick smiled.

"I have every confidence that you will, Seron."

* * *

<Lawrence residence.>

"Good evening, Mrs. Lawrence. This is Seron Maxwell. Do you remember me? My friend and I visited your home yesterday morning to take some photographs."

<Oh my. Yes, I certainly remember, Seron. You came with your lovely Bezelese friend, Megmica.>

“Yes. Do you have a moment?”

<Certainly.>

“We’ll be having a small dinner party here at the villa managed by the Ruf couple. We happened to receive the developed photos just now, and Megmica insisted we had to have you over for dinner and share the photos. I’m terribly sorry being so sudden, but would you like to join us?”

<My, my. That sounds wonderful.>

“Thank you. I’m sure Megmica will be pleased.”

<The pleasure is all mine. I’d been looking forward to chatting with her again. What time shall I be there by?>

“Would seven o’clock be all right?”

<That sounds perfect.>

“Would you like us to come pick you up by car, Mrs. Lawrence?”

<No thank you. Old people like me should walk around while we still can. But perhaps I could ask for a ride back afterwards?>

“Certainly! We look forward to seeing you soon, Mrs. Lawrence.”

<Thank you. See you soon.>

Chapter 9: Companions

It was fifteen to seven.

“Another guest! How lovely. The more the merrier.”

Mrs. Ruf merrily went about her cooking, none the wiser to the plot.

“Absolutely,” Mr. Ruf agreed, helping her in the kitchen.

“I will explain all the circumstances. Seron, when it is hard to explain with my power, please help me to explain,” Meg said, looking into Seron’s eyes.

“Yeah. I’ll be right there with you.” Seron met her gaze.

“Not much I can do now, I guess,” Larry mumbled.

“Let us pray for success,” Nick said in reply.

“What about us? What do we do?” asked Natalia.

“Just play it cool and act like everything’s normal,” Jenny answered.

“We will be here as well,” said Kurtz. Next to him, Litner gave a nod.

In the empty bathroom, Hartnett silently drew his handgun from its leather holster.

It was a 3-inch revolver. When Hartnett checked the cylinder, he found six .357 magnum rounds neatly loaded inside.

He slowly pushed the cylinder back inside and holstered the gun.

It was five to seven.

The doorbell rang.

“She’s here.” “She is here.”

Seron, Meg, and Hartnett all rose from their seats in the entrance hall.

As they walked up to the door, Seron took the lead and Meg and Hartnett followed.

It was still light outside and the flowers in the gardens seemed to glisten. Meg gave the gardens a brief glance before looking forward again.

Seron found Hannah Lawrence at the door.

“She has come here,” Meg said with a smile. Her pace quickened. Seron and Meg went to the door together.

“Welcome, Mrs. Lawrence. Thank you for coming.”

“You are welcome inside!”

They greeted her with smiles.

“Good evening. Thank you for the invitation,” Hannah replied, also smiling.

Seron said, “Mr. and Mrs. Ruf are the ones who manage the house, but they’re busy with preparations at the moment. Please, come inside.”

“Thank you for having me.”

Hartnett hung back a few steps away, watching Seron guide Hannah into the villa.

And—

“Ah.”

He noticed the man before Meg and Seron did.

Hannah turned as she stepped inside.

“Thank you for escorting me,” she said to the man.

“Huh?” “Oh?”

Seron and Meg noticed Hampleton behind Hannah as Hartnett rushed in.

Hartnett drew his gun and charged between Hannah and Hampleton, quickly taking aim with a roar.

“James Aide!”

“Freeze! Confederation Police! You are under arrest! Slowly put your hands in the air and kneel!”

“Damn it!” Seron grabbed Meg and Hannah by their wrists. “Let’s go!”

He pulled them away, gently so Hannah would not fall. But before he could take the final step—

“It’s all right,” Hannah said. Seron froze.

Before them, Hartnett stood with his left foot forward, aiming the gun with both hands.

“If you resist, I will open fire! Put your hands in the—”

Hampleton did as he was told, slowly raising his hands.

Once his arms were outstretched, he knelt on the spot.

“N-now get down and put your hands on the ground!” Hartnett ordered, lowering his gun.

Again, Hampleton complied. He leaned forward and put his hands and stomach against the ground.

Hartnett lowered his gun even more and continued, still tense.

“Cross your legs together! Now!”

Still on the ground, Hampleton placed his right leg over his left.

Only then did Hartnett finally look past the gun and address Seron.

“Inside!”

“Right.”

Seron pulled Meg and Hannah along once again. This time, both complied.

When he turned, he saw Hartnett give another order. “Hands behind your back!”

Then he went around behind Hampleton.

Hartnett pointed his gun at the back of Hampleton’s head and straddled his back.

And finally, he expertly placed a pair of handcuffs on Hampleton’s wrists with his left hand. Hampleton showed no resistance.

“James Aide! You’re under arrest!”

Hampleton, who had not said a word since arriving, looked up at Hartnett with his left cheek on the pavement and smiled softly.

And he whispered one calm word.

“Finally.”

“Wh-what just happened here?”

Seron returned to Larry at the entrance hall, Meg and Hannah in tow.

Outside the door was Hartnett, and lying under him was the restrained man, who did not even try to resist.

"I can't believe it. He came along with Mrs. Lawrence. Mr. Hartnett's got him, though," Seron explained, finally letting Meg and Hannah go. "Mr. Kurtz! Restraints!"

Kurtz rushed outside. He passed by Larry with a strong cloth rope used by bodyguards and ran to Hartnett's side.

Kurtz tied Hampleton's legs together, then wrapped the rope restraint around his arms and upper body. Hampleton was rendered completely immobile.

Hartnett did a quick check on his belongings. He examined everything thoroughly for weapons.

"Nothing..."

Then he finally holstered his gun and wiped with his sleeve the sweat that had formed so quickly on his brow.

Hartnett and Kurtz picked up Hampleton together and carried him to the entrance hall as if he were a mannequin.

"What happened?"

"Dunno." "I'm not certain."

Jenny, Natalia, and Nick came over, flabbergasted.

Hartnett laid Hampleton on the tiles in the entrance hall.

Then he pulled out a leather case from his jacket and flashed his ID at Hannah, who watched everything calmly.

"I'm Hartnett from the Confederation Police. Apologies for the sudden arrest, but this man is a known assassin wanted by the government."

Everyone watched, waiting for Hannah's reaction.

"I see. So you received my tip after all. Although I must say I hadn't expected an arrest here."

"Wh-what? *You're* the one who gave us the tip?" Hartnett uttered, jaw dropping. The newspaper club and the two bodyguards went silent.

"Yes. I am."

"I—th—thank you! You've helped us arrest a very dangerous man, madam! But...I...er..." Hartnett stammered, confused. He shook his head and furrowed his brow.

The others were equally confused.

"Wh-what is going on in this way? Mrs. Hannah knew this man was the wanted man? How did you know?" Meg, who was nearest to Hannah, asked.

"I knew."

Hannah replied so very firmly and nonchalantly. Meg was stunned.

"B-but how?!" Hartnett exclaimed, "Aide even changed his face! How did you know that he was a wanted man? Madam, were you part of the Confederation Police force? I see, you must have discovered this man by coincidence during your retirement and hired him!" he speculated wildly.

"The answer is 'no'," Hannah replied.

Several seconds passed in silence.

"I told her."

Hampleton was the one to break it.

Hampleton lay on the cold tiles, still restrained.

"I told her myself, detective," he said, his body completely immobile save for his mouth. There was an absolutely peaceful look on his face.

"Why? You were on the run for 15 years. You changed your face, your identity, and had us chasing you around all of Roxche," Hartnett said.

Hampleton replied quickly, as if having waited for the question.

"Because I don't need to run anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sick. I don't have much longer to live."

Hartnett was silent.

"The gods are good, don't you agree?"

"But...but why did you tell the madam your identity?"

"I didn't have a significant reason. It felt meaningless to hide when I was so close to death. Maybe I wanted to confess to someone. Get a clean conscience. Or maybe not. But either way, I'm grateful to her for listening to me and calling the police as I asked."

Hartnett looked back and forth from Hampleton and Hannah, who were both the very picture of calm.

"...Satisfied now?" he finally uttered, swallowing his outrage.

"Yes. I am. I don't have enough time left to pay for the lives I've taken now. Just put me in the prison hospital and be done with it. I'll be gone before spring."

"Damn it! I'm taking you to the Capital District!" Hartnett spat one last time, and turned to Hannah. "Please pardon us, madam! Seron here and I happened to realize this man's identity and brought you here because you might have been in danger. We planned to disclose his identity to you and arrest him. We had no idea this would happen."

"I understand. But you needn't have bothered so. I'm an old woman, I don't have many days left myself."

"Not at all, madam. Thank you for your cooperation. We'll visit you again to take some official statements."

"Of course. I'll be in this village, so please feel free to drop by anytime."

Hartnett nodded.

"Is the guest here?" Mr. Ruf asked, finally arriving on the scene. Hartnett quickly asked him to contact the police.

"Wait!"

Seron stopped him.

"What is it, Seron?"

"I—" Seron began, extremely conscious of Meg's worried gaze on his face. "I have a question for Mr. Hampleton."

"What is it, boy?" Hampleton replied from the floor. Hartnett cut in.

"Wait a second. This can wait, Seron."

"No, it can't. I have to ask now."

Hartnett furrowed his brow.

“Go on, boy. Ask,” Hampleton said, like a kind old man gently consoling a grandson. Seron knelt before Hampleton. Sitting on one knee he looked into Hampleton’s profiled face.

“Were you the one who killed the three people? Yesterday and the day before, in this village.”

Meg and the rest of the newspaper club gasped.

“Seron, we can take care of that on our end. Don’t bother,” Hartnett said. But Seron ignored him.

“Did you kill them?”

From the floor came the answer.

In the very same tone, from the very same expression.

“Yes.”

“I knew it!” “Oh my goodness!” “Huh.” “No way.” “Unbelievable.” “Damn it.”

With the voices of shock behind him, Seron quickly continued to the next question.

“On whose orders?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, boy.”

“I was told you’d killed many people.”

“Yes. At least 20 by my count.”

“Were any of those kills personal? Any you were never ordered to do?”

“...No.”

“Yes, that’s precisely what I heard. You only ever killed under orders. You were a professional assassin. Then let me ask again. On whose orders did you kill the three young men?”

Three seconds passed in silence. Then—

“No one.” “It was me.”

Two people gave two opposing answers at once.

“It was me. I was the one who hired him.”

Everyone turned to the owner of the voice.

To Hannah Lawrence.



“Ah, but...ah...ah,”

Meg could not find the words to speak. Seron spoke instead, rising to his feet and turning around.

“Why, Mrs. Lawrence?”

Hannah remained just as calm as Hampleton, as serene as ever.

“You knew it was me, didn’t you Seron? You knew I was his client.”

“I had a hunch, but I didn’t have any evidence.”

Hartnett was the first to butt into the cool conversation between Seron and Hannah.

“H-hold on! What are you two *talking* about?”

Hannah looked at Hartnett, then looked away.

At Seron’s grey eyes.

“Was it because of the flowerpots?”

At Seron’s question.

“My goodness! It cannot be!” Meg gasped. She was the only other person who knew about the flowers.

“Yes and no,” Hannah replied.

“Please tell me the truth.”

“It began with the flowerpots just as you say, Seron. When the boys knocked over the flowerpots. But my motive was different.”

“I don’t understand the difference.”

Hannah and Seron alone were the picture of tranquility, an old woman and a young man having a light conversation in the entrance hall of a luxury villa.

But around them were other young men and women standing rooted to the ground, a man in restraints on the floor across from them, and two men standing guard over him. All that added up to a scene that resembled a battle between the adults and the children.

“What’s this about flowerpots, Seron?” asked Larry.

“Mrs. Lawrence had potted flowers next to her gate. Someone from the local delinquent gangs apparently knocked them over for fun.”

“And—and *that’s* why she had them killed?” Larry asked, eyes wide.

“I had nothing against them personally. They just happened to catch my eye. And they’re the only ones who go around the village at night. Those were the only reasons I chose them.”

“Because they were easy to kill, is that what you want to say?” Seron’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes, Seron. I asked Hampleton to kill a few of the local boys. And he accepted.”

‘Why’, Seron wanted to ask. But Meg was faster.

“Why? For what reasons?”

Seron quietly released the breath he was holding.

“To do something bad, Megmica,” said Hannah, “Killing someone—getting someone killed—is something very, very bad.”

“Wh-what is good from something like this? I do not understand!”

“I don’t mind sharing with you, Megmica,” Hannah said, and began, “In Roxche, murderers are sent to hell. Do they say the same in Sou Be-Il?”

“What? Yes. Yes! Of course we say the same thing!”

Standing next to Meg, Seron narrowed his eyes and recalled the conversation they had on the autobahn.

“That’s why I did something so horrible. So I would go to hell after I die.”

“Pardon me? Did I hear my Roxchean speaking wrong? Mrs. Hannah said you would like to go to hell?”

“You didn’t hear wrong, Megmica. Yes, I do want to go to hell.”

“...Why?” Meg asked feebly. But before Hannah could answer—

“Who?” Seron asked, opening his eyes. “Who is waiting for you there, Mrs. Lawrence?”

“My husband,” Hannah replied.

“Your husband...why...?” Meg breathed.

“My husband was ordered to kill many people in the past. He would always say, ‘when I die, I’m sure to go to hell’. So I know he must be there now.”

“Why...why...why would you...?” Meg stammered again, and Seron wondered to how ask about Hannah’s husband. But—

“Madam—Mrs. Lawrence.” Hartnett spoke up. “Was your late husband by any chance called Ferdinand Lawrence?”

When she heard her husband’s name, Hannah narrowed her eyes. “Yes.”

“Who?” Natalia asked on everyone else’s behalf.

“Ferdinand Lawrence...” The answer came from Nick, who was well-versed in history. “He was Roxche’s longest-serving Minster of Justice. Nineteen years, starting 40 years ago.”

“*Minister*? Seriously?” Larry repeated. Nick nodded.

“I see.” “I see,” Jenny and Seron replied in unison.

Nick, who knew not when to stop when it came to history, continued.

“‘Longest-serving Minster of Justice’ also implies that he had signed just as many execution orders. This is what Mrs. Lawrence must mean.”

“Ah...” “Aha!” “I get it.” Meg, Larry, and Natalia finally nodded. Hartnett turned to Hannah.

“I can see your reasoning. Your late husband did indeed sent more people to hell in Roxche’s history than anyone else. But he was simply complying with the Confederation’s laws. He was—”

“—A good and dutiful man, you might say, an epithet I’m sure he must have loved to hear. He always said those who worked in law enforcement, putting their lives on the line for the people, were our heroes. He loved them very much,” Hannah said, cutting off Hartnett. “But he always said that his own actions were murders. And if that’s what he himself thought, it must be true.”

Hartnett could not argue. But Seron spoke.

“In other words, because you believe that your husband is in hell, you hired a professional assassin to kill three people—to do something evil, and so be sent to hell yourself,” he said mechanically, simply to confirm the truth.

“Yes,” Hannah said. And she went even further. “I met Hampleton over there two months ago at the clinic in Darro, the next town over. We’re in the same boat, he and I.”

“It’s an oncology clinic,” Jenny explained quickly.

“We had the same viewpoint on hell, so I decided to hire him. It was a happy coincidence that Hampleton also happened to be an excellent gardener.”

“That is... Mrs. Hannah, you do not have children? How will they think when they see you now?” Meg asked.

“I had a daughter, but she left before me. Along with my adorable grandson. It was an accident on the autobahn.”

For the first time, Hannah seemed sad.

“I see now...” Seron whispered.

“Then your daughter is in heaven! Your grandson is in heaven! Will you not be happy in heaven? Can you not pick the heaven with flowers?!” Meg pleaded. Hannah answered.

“My daughter is with her husband and their son. But there is only one person I love most. Who else will be at his side? I am going to meet him again. I will go to his side and tell him I will be there with him forever.”

“Will your husband want this?”

“I don’t know if he’ll feel the same way.”

“Th-then! When the time you meet, he does not agree! How will you do this? It will be so sad when your thoughts are different!”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as I can be with him.”

“I...cannot understand...”

“Someday you will, Megmica. Someday, when you fall in love.”

“Ah...”

Meg could say nothing. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Seron could do nothing but watch.

Several seconds passed, and Natalia stepped up to put a hand on Meg’s shoulder.

“There, there. That’s enough tears, Megmica,” she said, pulling Meg into a hug.

“Anyone else have any questions?” Hartnett asked amicably.

No one responded.

“I see.” Hartnett nodded, and turned to Hannah. “Mrs. Hannah Lawrence.”

“Yes.”

“You are under emergency arrest for the contract killing of three young men!” Hartnett said sharply.

“I understand,” Hannah replied, holding out her right hand to him as though accepting a dance. “Guide me, hero.”

* * *

The 3rd day of the eighth month.

Seron woke up at the same time again.

He changed into his gym uniform and went out onto the balcony.

“Yo Seron. You’re up too?”

He heard Larry’s voice from the garden, lit up by the blinding morning sun.

“Good morning, Seron.”

“Hey there.”

Then came Nick and Jenny’s voices. Larry and Nick were in T-shirts and jeans, Nick wearing his hair tied up again. Jenny was in red sweats, which may or may not have served as her pajamas.

“Good morning. You’re all up early.” Seron greeted the others in the garden.

“Yeah. Nick said he’d show us his moves,” Larry replied. At that moment—

“Not every day Seron gets up later than us all.”

Another voice spoke, this time from overhead.

Seron leaned over and looked up to find Natalia with her long hair hanging down from the third floor.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. You’re free till breakfast, right? You get special permission to come on up here.”

“Huh? Wait, was that your room, Nat?” Seron wondered.

“Of course, this is my room!” Meg popped up, her long black hair cascading down.

“I’ll be right there.”

Seron rushed into the bathroom and out again, then out of his room and up the stairs to the third floor.

“C’mon in,” Natalia said, and Seron obeyed.

Doing his best not to look at the sofa covered in Meg’s suitcase and her clothes from the day before, Seron walked straight ahead to the balcony.

And he greeted the girls wearing the same tracksuits as he was.

“Morning. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” Meg replied with a smile. Natalia nodded. “More or less.”

The previous night—

Having arrested the two culprits, Hartnett took them to the police station on his own car with Kurtz’s help.

There was nothing left in the entryway.

“Oh dear. We’ll have some food left over,” Mrs. Ruf said gently, stepping outside. Meg, who had been sobbing into Natalia’s arms, turned.

“I will eat the food left over!” she declared, and wiped her tears as she led everyone to the dining room. And she ate more enthusiastically than anyone.

“Yeah. Good to see you’re eating right,” Natalia said.

“When it is sad, it gets happy when I eat!” Meg said, eating through half-sobs.

Seron, on the other hand, could barely take a bite.

“I! Do not! Acknowledge! Or understand! Or give sympathy!”

Seron stared at his full plate of food and listened to Meg declare over her own.

“I will not complain to the Roxche laws! I do not think the Sou Be-Il laws are always truth!”

Meg's outrage knew no end.

"Don't push yourself too hard, Megmica."

Meg ate enough to worry even Natalia, downed an entire cup of tea, and finally—

"I will sleep now."

She stood from her seat.

Two girls with long hair and a boy with slightly long hair stood in a row on the balcony.

"Look at that. Seron's on the third floor." Larry chuckled in the middle of stretching his arms at the center of the garden.

"My, my. Since when was our Seron Maxwell one of the ladies?" Nick joked, stretching out with a long wooden staff he had found somewhere.

"Wish you were first, Nick?" Jenny played along, looking at the photometer around her neck.

"Not at all," Nick replied nonchalantly and began to twirl the staff on his right side.

The staff spun loudly, cutting through the air.

"After sleeping a night, my heart has calmed. The weather is very good today as well," Meg said with a smile.

"Yeah," Seron replied briefly from next to her.

He glanced at her profiled face.

She looked a little more flushed than the previous day.

"I'll see you two later," Natalia said suddenly, and went back inside with her long hair swishing.

"Huh?"

"Nothing big, Seron. I just gotta wash all this hair and dry it and style it. It takes time. I called you here so you could take care of Megmica."

Natalia took her towel and headed into the bathroom.

"No peeking."

Seron said nothing, looking straight ahead.

Meg was also looking straight ahead, at the flowers and the plains beyond. Seron wondered what he should say. But he did not have to think long.

"Seron. When you have the person you love, after you die, even if it is hell, will you wish to be with her forever?"

"Yes," he replied firmly.

Meg looked out at the rolling green plains and put on a warm, gentle smile.

"I hope I'll be able to say the same too," she said in Bezelese.

"Yeah," Seron replied in Roxchean.



“Hm?”

Larry looked up from the gardens at Seron and Meg.

“They’re smiling.”

He saw a pair of shoulders side-by-side and a pair of smiling faces.

“Hm?”

Nick, who had been swinging his staff with his lean but strong arms, stopped in a high attack position and followed Larry’s gaze.

“How sweet. Jenny, would that not make for a wonderful photograph?”

Jenny, who stood with her back to the east, was looking into her viewfinder. “Hey, don’t just stop! Keep going! Show me some awesome moves!” she ordered.

“You didn’t end up taking any photos last night, huh?” asked Larry. Jenny replied, winding the film.

“It wasn’t the kind of case we could post about on the school walls. I bet Nick’s secret’ll sell better. Now take off that T-shirt, Nick.”

“Wha—please, anything but that, Jenny.”

“President’s orders.”

“There are some orders I simply cannot abide by.”

“You’ll be Mr. Popularity, I guarantee it. Especially with the girls.”

“I respectfully decline.”

“Oh, did you want to be popular with the boys then?”

“Of course not.”

“Then take it off.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow your logic, Jenny.”

“President’s orders.”

“And we are back at square one.”

“Man...” Larry looked up at the sky, listening to the pointless conversation. His blue eyes reflected the clear blue sky.

-To be continued-

晴雨沢エミのあけさが年末からの
近況報告めたいは感じになつたので。
僕もモロバクしてる事にしんだ。

■12月... 電撃文庫の忘年会に行ってきたよ。

普段チャットなんかで話してる。

イラストターミナルと会う。

僕のテイルだす。なんだかお華式めたいな

空気になる。

よく考えたら、リアルで会話とか。

超えた。

でも楽しかったぞ。ホト。

■1月... 家で
じとしてた。

■2月... じとしている。

ステキな
年末年始!

黒髪白でた。

アニメ
ジェニー